# Ace in the Hole

# John Updike

THE MOMENT his car touched the boulevard heading home, Ace flicked on the radio. He needed the radio, especially today. In the seconds before the tubes warmed up, he said aloud, doing it just to hear a human voice, “Jesus. She’ll pop her lid.” His voice, though familiar, irked him; it sounded thin and scratchy, as if the bones in his head were picking up static. In a deeper register Ace added, “She’ll murder me.” Then the radio came on, warm and strong, so he stopped worrying. The Five Kings were doing “Blueberry Hill”; to hear them made Ace feel so sure inside that from the pack pinched between the car roof and the sun shield he plucked a cigarette, hung it on his lower lip, snapped a match across the rusty place on the dash, held the flame in the instinctive spot near the tip of his nose, dragged, and blew out the match, all in time to the music. He rolled down the window and snapped the match so it spun end over end into the gutter. “Two points,” he said, and cocked the cigarette toward the roof of the car, sucked powerfully, and exhaled two plumes through his nostrils. He was beginning to feel like himself, Ace Anderson, for the first time that whole day. Not a good day, so far. He beat time on the accelerator. The car jerked crazily. “On Blueberry Hill,” he sang, “my heart stood still. The wind in the willow tree”—he braked for a red light—“played love’s suh-weet melodee—”

“Go, Dad, bust your lungs!” a kid’s voice blared. The kid was riding in a ’52 Pontiac that had pulled up beside Ace at the light. The profile of the driver, another kid, was dark over his shoulder.

Ace looked over at him and smiled slowly, just letting one side of his mouth lift a little. “Why don’t you just shove it?” he asked, good-naturedly. It was only a couple of years since he had been their age.

But the kid, who looked Italian, lifted his thick upper lip and spat out the window. The spit gleamed on the asphalt like a half-dollar.

“Now isn’t that pretty?” Ace said, keeping one eye on the light. “You miserable wop. You are miserable.” While the kid was trying to think of some smart comeback, the light changed. Ace dug out so hard he smelled burned rubber. In his rearview mirror he saw the Pontiac lurch forward a few yards, then stop dead, right in the middle of the intersection.

The idea of them stalling their fat tin Pontiac kept him in a good humor all the way home. He decided to stop at his mother’s place and pick up the baby, instead of waiting for Evey to do it. His mother must have seen him drive up. She came out on the porch holding a plastic spoon and smelling of cake.

“You’re out early,” she told him.

“Goldman fired me,” Ace told her.

“Good for you,” his mother said. “I always said he never treated you right.” She brought a cigarette out of her apron pocket and tucked it deep into one corner of her mouth, the way she did when something pleased her.

Ace lighted it for her. “Goldman was O.K. personally,” he said. “He just wanted too much for his money. That kind does. I didn’t mind working the Saturdays, but until eleven, twelve Friday nights was too much. Everybody has a right to some leisure.”

“Well, I don’t dare think what Evey will say, but I, for one, thank dear God you had the brains to get out of it. I always said that job had no future to it—no future of any kind, Freddy.”

“I guess,” Ace admitted. “But I wanted to keep at it, for the family’s sake.”

“Now, I know I shouldn’t be saying this, but any time Evey—this is just between us—any time Evey thinks she can do better, there’s room for you and Bonnie right in your father’s house.” She pinched her lips together. He could almost hear the old lady think, There, I’ve said it.

“Look, Mom, Evey tries awfully hard, and anyway you know she can’t work that way. Not that that—I mean, she’s a realist, too.…” He let the rest of the thought fade as he watched a kid across the street dribbling a basketball around a telephone pole that had a backboard and net nailed on it.

“Evey’s a wonderful girl of her own kind. But I’ve always said, and your father agrees, Roman Catholics ought to marry among themselves. Now, I know I’ve said it before, but when they get out in the greater world—”

“No, Mom.”

She frowned, smoothed herself, and said, “Your name was in the paper today.”

Ace chose to let that go by. He kept watching the kid with the basketball. It was funny how, though the whole point was to get the ball up into the air, kids grabbed it by the sides and squeezed. Kids just didn’t think. Push it up, up.

“Did you hear?” his mother asked.

“Sure, but so what?” Ace said. His mother’s lower lip was coming at him, so he changed the subject. “I guess I’ll take Bonnie.”

His mother went into the house and brought back his daughter, wrapped in a blue blanket. The baby looked dopey. “She fussed all day,” his mother complained. “I said to your father, ‘Bonnie is a dear little girl, but without a doubt she’s her mother’s daughter.’ You were the best-natured boy.”

“Well, I had everything,” Ace said with impatience. His mother blinked and didn’t argue. He nicely dropped his cigarette into a brown flowerpot on the edge of the porch and took his daughter into his arms. She was getting heavier, solid. When he reached the end of the cement walk, his mother was still on the porch, waving to him. He was so close he could see the fat around her elbow jiggle, and he only lived a half-block up the street, yet here she was, waving to him as if he was going to Japan.

At the door of his car, it seemed stupid to him to drive the measly half-block home. “Never ride where you can walk,” Coach Behn used to tell his boys. Ace left the ignition keys in his pocket and ran along the pavement with Bonnie laughing and bouncing at his chest. He slammed the door of his landlady’s house open and shut, pounded up the two flights of stairs, and was panting so hard when he reached the door of his apartment that it took him a couple of seconds to fit the key into the lock.

The run must have tuned Bonnie up. As soon as he lowered her into the crib, she began to shout and wave her arms. He didn’t want to play with her. He tossed some blocks and a rattle into the crib and walked into the bathroom, where he turned on the hot water and began to comb his hair. Holding the comb under the faucet before every stroke, he combed his hair forward. It was so long, one strand curled under his nose and touched his lips. He whipped the whole mass back with a single pull. He tucked in the tufts around his ears, and ran the comb straight back on both sides of his head. With his fingers he felt for the little ridge at the back where the two sides met. It was there, as it should have been. Finally, he mussed the hair in front enough for one little lock to droop over his forehead, like Alan Ladd. It made the temple seem lower than it was. Every day, his hairline looked higher. He had observed all around him how blond men seem to go bald first. He remembered reading somewhere, though, that baldness shows virility.

On his way to the kitchen he flipped the left-hand knob of the television. Bonnie was always quieter with the set on. Ace didn’t see how she could understand much of it, but it seemed to mean something to her. He found a can of beer in the refrigerator behind some brownish lettuce and those hot dogs Evey never got around to cooking. She’d be home any time. The clock said five-twelve. She’d pop her lid.

Ace didn’t see what he could do but try and reason with her. “Evey,” he’d say, “you ought to thank God I got out of it. It had no future to it at all.” He hoped she wouldn’t get too mad, because when she was mad he wondered if he should have married her, and doubting that made him feel crowded. It was bad enough, his mother always crowding him. He punched the two triangles in the top of the beer can, the little triangle first, and then the big one, the one he drank from. He hoped Evey wouldn’t say anything that couldn’t be forgotten. What women didn’t seem to realize was that there were things you knew but shouldn’t say.

He felt sorry he had called the kid in the car a wop.

Ace balanced the beer on a corner where two rails of the crib met and looked under the chairs for the morning paper. He had trouble finding his name, because it was at the bottom of a column on an inside sports page, in a small article about the county basketball statistics:

“Dusty” Tremwick, Grosvenor Park’s sure-fingered center, copped the individual scoring honors with a season’s grand (and we do mean grand) total of 376 points. This is within eighteen points of the all-time record of 394 racked up in the 1949–1950 season by Olinger High’s Fred Anderson.

Ace angrily sailed the paper into an armchair. Now it was Fred Anderson; it used to be Ace. He hated being called Fred, especially in print, but, then, the sportswriters were all office boys anyway, Coach Behn used to say.

“Do not just ask for shoe polish,” a man on television said, “but ask for Emu Shoe Gloss, the only polish that absolutely guarantees to make your shoes look shinier than new!” Ace turned the sound off, so that the man moved his mouth like a fish blowing bubbles. Right away, Bonnie howled. Ace turned it back on, loud enough to drown her out, and went into the kitchen, without knowing what he wanted there. He wasn’t hungry; his stomach was tight. It used to be like that when he walked to the gymnasium alone in the dark before a game and could see the people from town, kids and parents, crowding in at the lighted doors. But once he was inside, the locker room would be bright and hot, and the other guys would be there, laughing and towel-slapping, and the tight feeling would leave. Now there were whole days when it didn’t leave.

A key scratched at the door lock. Ace decided to stay in the kitchen. Let her find him. Her heels clicked on the floor for a step or two; then the television set went off. Bonnie began to cry. “Shut up, honey,” Evey said. There was a silence.

“I’m home,” Ace called.

“No kidding. I thought Bonnie got the beer by herself.”

Ace laughed. She was in a sarcastic mood, thinking she was Lauren Bacall. That was all right, just so she kept funny. Still smiling, Ace eased into the living room and got hit with, “What are you smirking about? Another question: What’s the idea running up the street with Bonnie like she was some football?”

“You saw that?”

“Your mother told me.”

“You saw her?”

“Of course I saw her. I stopped by to pick up Bonnie. What the hell do you think—I read her tiny mind?”

“Take it easy,” Ace said, wondering if Mom had told her about Goldman.

“Take it easy? Don’t coach me. Another question: Why’s the car out in front of her place? You give the car to her?”

“Look, I parked it there to pick up Bonnie, and I thought I’d leave it there.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? I just did. I just thought I’d get the exercise. It’s not that far, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. If you’d been on your feet all day a block would look like one hell of a long way.”

“O.K. I’m sorry.”

She hung up her coat and stepped out of her shoes and walked around the room picking up things. She stuck the newspaper in the wastebasket.

Ace said, “My name was in the paper today.”

“They spell it right?” She shoved the paper deep into the basket with her stocking foot. There was no doubt; she knew about Goldman.

“They called me Fred.”

“Isn’t that your name? What is your name anyway? Hero J. Great?”

There wasn’t any answer, so Ace didn’t try any. He sat down on the sofa, lighted a cigarette, and waited.

Evey picked up Bonnie. “Poor thing stinks. What does your mother do, scrub out the toilet with her?”

“Can’t you take it easy? I know you’re tired.”

“You should. I’m always tired.”

Evey and Bonnie went into the bathroom; when they came out, Bonnie was clean and Evey was calm. Evey sat down in an easy chair beside Ace and rested her stocking feet on his knees. “Hit me,” she said, twiddling her fingers for the cigarette.

The baby crawled up to her chair and tried to stand, to see what he was giving her. Leaning over close to Bonnie’s nose, Evey grinned, smoke leaking through her teeth, and said, “Only for grownups, honey.”

“Eve,” Ace began, “there was no future in that job. Working all Saturday, and then Friday nights on top of it.”

“I know. Your mother told me all that, too. What I want from you is what happened.”

She was going to take it like a sport, then. He tried to remember how it did happen. “It wasn’t my fault,” he said. “Goldman told me to back this ’51 Chevy into the line that faces Church Street. He just bought it from an old guy this morning who said it only had thirteen thousand on it. So in I jump and start her up. There was a knock in the engine like a machine gun. I almost told Goldman he’d bought a squirrel, but you know I cut that smart stuff out ever since Larry Pallotta laid me off.”

“You told me that story. What happens in this one?”

“Look, Eve. I am telling ya. Do you want me to go out to a movie or something?”

“Suit yourself.”

“So I jump in the Chevy and snap it back in line, and there was a kind of scrape and thump. I get out and look and Goldman’s running over, his arms going like this”—Ace whirled his own arms and laughed—“and here was the whole back fender of a ’49 Merc mashed in. Just looked like somebody took a planer and shaved off the bulge, you know, there at the back.” He tried to show her with his hands. “The Chevy, though, didn’t have a dent. It even gained some paint. But Goldman, to hear him— Boy, they can rave when their pocketbook’s hit. He said—” Ace laughed again. “Never mind.”

Evey said, “You’re proud of yourself.”

“No, listen. I’m not happy about it. But there wasn’t a thing I could do. It wasn’t my driving at all. I looked over on the other side, and there was just two or three inches between the Chevy and a Buick. Nobody could have gotten into that hole. Even if it had hair on it.” He thought this was pretty good.

She didn’t. “You could have looked.”

“There just wasn’t the space. Goldman said stick it in; I stuck it in.”

“But you could have looked and moved the other cars to make more room.”

“I guess that would have been the smart thing.”

“I guess, too. Now what?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean now what? Are you going to give up? Go back to the Army? Your mother? Be a basketball pro? What?”

“You know I’m not tall enough. Anybody under six-six they don’t want.”

“Is that so? Six-six? Well, please listen to this, Mr. Six-Foot-Five-and-a-Half: I’m fed up. I’m ready as Christ to let you run.” She stabbed her cigarette into an ashtray on the arm of the chair so hard the ashtray spun to the floor, spilling its contents. Evey flushed and shut up.

What Ace hated most in their arguments was these silences after Evey had said something so ugly she wanted to take it back. “Better ask the priest first,” he murmured.

She sat right up, snatching her stocking feet off his knees. “If there’s one thing I don’t want to hear about from you it’s priests. You let the priests to me. You don’t know a damn thing about it. Not a damn thing.”

“Hey, look at Bonnie,” he said, trying to make his tone easy.

Evey didn’t hear him. “If you think,” she went on, “if for one rotten moment you think, Mr. Fred, that the be-all and end-all of my life is you and your hot-shot stunts—”

“Look, Mother,” Ace pleaded, pointing at Bonnie. The baby had picked up the copper ashtray and put it on her head for a hat.

Evey glanced down angrily. “Cute,” she said. “Cute as her daddy.”

The ashtray slid from Bonnie’s head and she groped after it.

“Yeah, but watch,” Ace said. “Watch her hands. They’re sure.”

“You’re nuts,” Evey said.

“No, honest. Bonnie’s great. She’s a natural. Get the rattle for her. Never mind, I’ll get it.” In two steps, Ace was at Bonnie’s crib, picking the rattle out of the mess of blocks and plastic rings and beanbags. He extended the rattle toward his daughter, shaking it delicately. Made wary by this burst of attention, Bonnie reached with both hands; like two separate animals they approached from opposite sides and touched the smooth rattle simultaneously. A smile worked up on her face. Ace tugged weakly. She held on, and then tugged back. “She’s a natural,” Ace said, “and it won’t do her any good because she’s a girl. Baby, we got to have a boy.”

“I’m not your baby,” Evey said, closing her eyes.

Saying “Baby” over and over again, Ace backed up to the radio, neglected on a shelf behind the television. Without turning around, he manipulated the volume knob. In the moment before the tubes warmed up, Evey had time to say, “Wise up, Fred. What shall we do?”

The radio came in on something slow and tinkly: dinner music. Ace picked Bonnie up and set her in the crib. “Shall we dance?” he asked his wife, bowing.

“We need to talk.”

“Baby. It’s the cocktail hour.”

“This is getting us no place,” she said, rising from her chair, though.

“Fred Junior. I can see him now,” he said, seeing nothing.

“We will have no Juniors.”

In her crib, Bonnie whimpered at the sight of her mother being seized. Ace fitted his hand into the natural place on Evey’s back and she shuffled stiffly into his lead. When, with a sudden injection of saxophones, the tempo quickened, he spun her out carefully, keeping the beat with his shoulders. Her hair brushed his lips as she minced in, then swung away, to the end of his arm; he could feel her toes dig into the carpet. He flipped his own hair back from his eyes. The music ate through his skin and mixed with the nerves and small veins; he seemed to be great again, and all the other kids were around them, in a ring, clapping time.