# The Kid’s Whistling

# John Updike

THINGS WERE NEARLY PERFECT: Christmas was three weeks away, Roy worked late every evening and was doubling his salary in overtime, and tonight rain was falling. Rain was Roy’s favorite weather, and he never felt more at rest, more at home, than when working nights in his hot little room on the third floor of Herlihy’s—the department store stretching dark and empty under him, the radio murmuring, maybe the rain tapping on the black skylight, the engines shuttling back and forth in the Fourth Street freight yards, half a mile away.

The one trouble was the kid’s whistling. For ten months a year Roy had the Display Department to himself. If the orders for counter cards piled up, Shipping lent him a boy to help out. But at the beginning of November, Simmons, the store manager, hired a high-school kid to come in weekday evenings and on Saturdays. This year’s helper was called Jack, and he whistled. He whistled all the time.

At the hand press, Jack was printing counter cards and rendering “Summertime.” He seemed to feel the tune needed a cool, restrained treatment, for which Roy was grateful; he was all set to begin the Toy Department sign and wanted things to go well. Though the customary sans-serif or bold roman would have done, he planned to try Old English capitals. It was for his own satisfaction; no one would appreciate the extra effort, least of all Simmons. On a plywood board, ½″ × 1½″ × 11′, primed with off-white, Roy ruled the guidelines and pencilled the letters lightly, mostly to get the spacing. He lit a cigarette, puffed it a moment, not inhaling, then set it on the edge of the workbench. His drawing board was hinged to the second of four shelves; in working position, the board rested upon and overhung the rim of the waist-high bench at an angle of thirty degrees. When not in use, the board was supposed to hook into a loop screw attached to the top shelf, but the screw had worked out of the soft pine, and the board always hung down. This way, the lowest shelf was half concealed, and had become a cave of empty paint jars, forgotten memos, petrified brushes, scraps of Masonite. On the second shelf, in rainbow order, the jars of poster paints sat. The third shelf held jars of nails, boxes of tacks and staples, two staplers (one broken), colored inks (dried up), penholders in a coffee mug, pen points in a cigar box, brushes in a beer mug, three hammers, two steel rods intended to brace the arms of mannequins, and a hand-jigsaw frame without a blade; these things were not as well ordered as the poster paints. The tall space between the fourth shelf and the ceiling contained a blackened chaos of obsolete displays—silhouettes of Indians, firecrackers, reindeer, clouds, dollar signs. Shelves in ascending degrees of muddle also covered the wall on Roy’s left. To his right, at some distance, were the kid and the hand press and the door out. Behind him were the power tools, some timber, and the mannequin closet, built into the dimmest corner of the room. Though Roy had a long-legged stool, he stood at his drawing board. He chose a No. 9 wedge brush and a jar of Sky Blue poster paint. He glanced into the lettering book, open to “Old English.” He made certain the shaker of Silverdust was within reach.

Then, with no more hesitation, Roy dipped the brush and touched it to the board. The great crescent of the T went on without a tremor. The broad curve capping it had just the proper jaunty hint of a left-to-right downslant. With a No. 2 brush he added the hairlines. He quickly sprinkled Silverdust over the moist letter, blew the loose stuff away, and stepped back, pleased.

In his head Roy slammed a door shut on Jack’s insistent version of “Lady Be Good.” He shook his brush clean in a jar of water and executed the O in Deep Yellow. He was not sure that the yellow would stand out enough against the white, but it did, especially after the Silverdust was added.

Jack switched to “After You’ve Gone,” doing it loud, tapping a foot. It got so trumpety that, in the middle of putting the hairline on the Y, Roy, afraid his hand might shake, turned and stared burningly at Jack’s spine. It made no impression. Jack was tall, about six inches taller than Roy, and thin. His neck, no thicker than an arm, led into a muff of uncut hair. Clapping two pieces of wooden type on the table, the kid leaned back and let fly four enormous, jubilant notes.

“Hey, Jack,” Roy called.

The boy turned. “Beg pardon?” He looked startled, exposed. He wasn’t one of these mean kids, actually.

“How about a Coke?”

“Sure. If you’re having one.”

Roy didn’t want a soft drink; he wanted quiet. But he had worked himself into a position where there was nothing to do but go out into the dark hall, dig two dimes from his pocket, insert them in the machine, wait for the cold wet bottles to bump down, and take them back to the Display Department. When he gave Jack one, the boy offered him a nickel and five pennies. “Keep it,” Roy told him. “Buy yourself a saxophone.”

Jack’s pleasant, ignorant face showed that the hint had been too subtle for him. “Want some peanuts?” he said, gesturing toward an ink-smudged can labelled PLANTERS.

The cold weight of the bottle in Roy’s fingers made salted nuts seem appropriate. He took a good handful, then, noticing the can was nearly empty, dropped some back into it. As he fed them to himself, one by one, the kid watched him, apparently expecting conversation. Roy pointed with a loosely clenched hand at the sheaf of orders on the spindle. “Good night’s work there.”

“I can’t get all them out tonight.”

Roy knew this was so, but if he agreed, it might encourage the kid to loaf. He returned to his sign without another word. He polished off the fine lines of the Y and, in one slow, satisfying movement of his arm, did the tail. On with the Silverdust.

Washing both brushes, opening the jar labelled “Crimson,” Roy was conscious of his hands. They were square and smooth, with dandified nails, and completely clean, yet not so white that they could not take a flattering tan from the contrast with the clean cuffs. The cuffs, folded back exactly twice and starched to about the stiffness of thin cardboard, pressed lightly on the flats of his forearms and gave him an agreeable packaged feeling. It was just as well he hadn’t bawled the kid out. Roy knew it was only the boy’s kind of peace, standing over there whistling, playing with type, his crusty apron snug around him, his can of salted peanuts and his pack of Philip Morris beside him on the table, God knows what going on in his brain. The kid smoked steadily. Once, when Roy asked Jack if he didn’t smoke too much, Jack had said no, this was the only place he ever smoked, which was exactly the point, but Roy let it drop. It wasn’t as if he was the kid’s father.

Roy started the L. Jack started “If I Could Be with You One Hour Tonight,” in an irritating, loose, whoopsy way, trying to be Coleman Hawkins or some bop shade. In exasperation, Roy switched on the radio he kept on the shelf. It was an old Motorola; its tubes were all but shot. Even on full, it wasn’t loud enough for Jack to hear above his own noise. He kept on whistling, like he was a bird and this was some treetop.

Roy finished up the L. Suddenly Jack went quiet. Roy, hoping the kid wasn’t offended, turned off the radio. In the silence, he heard the sounds that had really made the kid stop: the elevator door clanging shut and then high heels clicking.

More than a minute seemed to pass before the Display Department door opened. When it did, there was Maureen, wearing a transparent raincoat, moisture beaded all over it and in her clipped red hair. There was something aggressive about that soaked hair. She frowned in the bright fluorescent light. “It’s dark out there,” she said. “I got lost.”

“The switch is right by the elevator,” was all Roy could think of to say.

She walked past the printing machine, with the kid at it, and came to stand by Roy. She looked at the sign.

“ ‘Todl?’ ” she read.

“ ‘Toyl.’ That’s a Y.”

“But it’s closed at the top. It looks like a D with a wiggly tail.”

“This is Gothic lettering.”

“Well, I don’t want to argue. It’s probably just me.”

“How come you’re down here? What’s up?”

“The rain made me restless.”

“You walked all the way? Who let you into the store?”

“It’s only six blocks. I don’t mind walking in the rain. I like it.” Maureen’s head was tilted and her hands were busy at an earring. “The watchman let me in. He said, ‘I’ll take you right on up, Mrs. Mays. He’ll be glad to see you. He’ll be real lonely and happy to see you.’ ”

“Orley let you in?”

“I didn’t ask his name.” She took a cigarette from Roy’s pack.

“Better take off your raincoat,” Roy said. “You don’t want to catch cold.”

She shrugged it off, draped it over the electric jigsaw, and stood, her legs spread as far as her narrow skirt allowed, smoking and studying the stuff in the top rack. Roy drew down the Orange and began painting the A.

“Orange next to red,” she said. “Ooey.”

“Hih,” he grunted, not hard enough to jiggle his hand.

“What’s in these boxes?”

“Boxes?” Roy was concentrating and barely heard what she said.

“These boxes.”

He lifted the brush and looked around to see what she was pointing at. “Tinsel.”

“Tinsel! Why, you have two, four, six, six huge crates of it here! What do you do with it all? Sleep in it? Do you feed it to cows?”

“You get a reduction for quantity.”

She kicked one of the crates thoughtfully and moved on, inspecting. The last time Maureen had come into Herlihy’s was over three months ago, to pick him up for dinner and a movie. She hadn’t been in this mood then. “Why don’t you clean this mess out?” she called in a resonant, boxed-in voice from the closet where the mannequins were stored.

“Be careful. Those things cost.” Roy pointed up the big sweeping serif on the A.

She came back into the room. “What are these for?”

He doused the drying letter with Silverdust before turning to see what she meant. “They’re pine boughs.”

“I know that. I mean what are you going to do with them?”

“What do you mean, what am I going to do with them? Put them in the window, make wreaths. This is Christmas, for Chrissake.”

He turned his back on her and stared at his sign. She came over and stood beside him. He began the N. As he completed the downstroke, his elbow touched her side, she was standing that close.

“When are you coming home?” she asked softly, for the first time acting like there was a third person in the room.

“What time is it now?”

“A little after nine.”

“I don’t see how I can get away before eleven. I have to finish this sign.”

“It’s almost done now.”

“I have to finish the sign; then I thought the kid and I would hang it. And then there are other things to do. It piles up. I’ll try to make it by eleven—”

“Roy, really.”

“I’ll try to make it by eleven, but I can’t guarantee it. I’m sorry, honey, but Simmons is on my neck all the time. What the hell: I’m getting time and a half.”

She was silent while he put the serifs on the N. “So I suppose there’s no point in my waiting around here,” she said at last.

The N looked fine. In fact, the entire sign was more than passable. He was rather proud of himself, that he hadn’t let her showing up rattle him.

“I’ll see you around eleven,” Maureen said. “I’ll keep awake if I can.” She was putting on her raincoat.

“Here, let me walk you out.”

“Oh, no.” She lifted a long pale sarcastic palm. “Don’t let me disturb you. Time and a half, you know. I can flounder out on my own.”

Roy decided, seeing the mood she was in, that it would be better to let her make whatever point she thought she was making.

By way of patching things up, he watched her leave. He could tell from the cocky, hollow-backed way she walked toward the door that she knew his eyes were on her. Instead of passing by Jack’s bench, she paused and said, “Hello. What keeps you up so late?”

Jack rolled his eyes toward the racks of freshly printed signs—$1.50 ea. $2.98 per pair; PRE-XMAS PANIC SALE; 100% Silk MEN’S TIES; Mixed Unmentionables from 89¢. “Printing these.”

“All those on this little thing?” Maureen touched the press. “Inky!”

She showed Jack the first and second fingers of her hand; each was tipped with a crimson spot the size of a confetti bit. The kid poked around helplessly for a clean rag. The best he could do was offer her a corner of his apron. “Thank you so much,” she said, wiping her fingers slowly, thoroughly. At the door, she smiled and said “Ta-ta, all,” to a point in the room midway between her husband and the boy.

Roy chose to paint the last letter, D, in Sky Blue again, the same as the initial T. It would give the thing unity. As he formed the letter, first with the No. 9 brush, then with the No. 2, he was aware of something out of place, something askew, in his room, and with a section of his mind he tried to locate the trouble. This was a mistake. When the letter was covered with Silverdust, Roy stepped back and saw that he had botched it. The D was too plump, slightly out of scale and too close to the N. It was nothing Simmons or anybody would notice—who looked at signs, anyway?—but Roy knew it had been ruined, and now knew why. The kid had stopped whistling.