# Toward Evening

# John Updike

WAITING for a number 5 bus in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Rafe was tired and hence dreamy. When the bus at last came and a short fatty woman in black bounced in front of him and then stopped, apparently paralyzed, right at the open doors, with the bus driver tapping the wheel and Rockefeller’s towers gathered above them like a thunderhead, Rafe was not very much surprised. The woman made metallic, agitated noises. She seemed unable to step up, to grab the vertical bar, to move away, to do anything. Her hat, black straw strewn with purple berries, quivered, whether with indignation or fright, there was no telling. “Here we go,” Rafe said, grabbing her a few inches below the armpits and hoisting. The woman was filled with sand. The only thing that worried Rafe was, he was carrying in one hand, by a loop of string, a box containing a mobile for the baby and didn’t want it crushed.

“Oh, thank you!” a chirping voice beneath the hat cried even before she was safe on the step. “Thank you so much, whoever you are.” His face seemed to be in her hat; he could see little else. The cloth beneath his fingers turned moist and kept slipping; Rafe had the frightening notion that something would break, and the sack spill, and the woman angrily sink to the pavement as a head in a nest of vacant clothing, like Ray Bolger in The Wizard of Oz. Suddenly, when her ascension seemed impossible, she was up, and his freed hands jerked, as if birds had flown from them.

“Wasn’t that kind?” the woman asked the bus driver, not turning, though, and never showing Rafe her face.

“Move to the rear,” the driver said in the soft level tones of a poor disciplinarian. Holding the box close to his chest, Rafe edged through the bodies, hunting a porcelain loop. The woman in black had disappeared, yet she couldn’t have found a seat. And in the rear of the bus, where there was ample standing space, a beautiful girl stood. Two ash-blue streaks had been symmetrically dyed into her brandy-colored hair. Her topcoat, box-style and black, hung open, half sheathing her body. Her feet, in gray heels, were planted on the sides of an invisible V. Numberless V’s were visible wherever two edges of the pencil-stripe fabric of her suit met: in a straight seam down her back, along her sleeves, within her lapels, at the side of her skirt (very acute, these). At the base of her throat, where a V seemed promised, something more complex occurred, involving the sheathed extremities of opposed collarbones, the tapered shelves of their upper edges, the two nervous and rather thoroughbred cords of her neck, and between them a hollow where you could lay a teaspoon. She was less tall than her thinness made her appear; her forehead was level with Rafe’s chin.

The bus veered. The standees swung, and her face, until then averted, turned toward his—a fine face, lucid. The kind of mouth you felt spoke French. If her nose had been smaller it would have been too small. The indentation in the center of the upper lip—the romantic dimple, Rafe’s mother had called it, claiming, in the joking, sentimental way she had assumed to raise a child, that in its depth the extent of sexual vigor could be read—was narrow and incisive. Rafe was wondering about her eyes when she turned them up from her book to stare at him for staring, and he lowered his lids too quickly to gain any prize but a meagre impression of bigness. The book in her hand was À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs.

After a few moments, he felt that even studying her hand was an intrusion in the ellipse of repose focused on the twin points of face and book. Rafe hugged the box containing the mobile and, stooping down, looked out of the bus window. They had rounded Columbus Circle and were headed up Broadway. The clearly marked numbers on the east side of the street ran: 1832, 1836, 1846, 1850 (Wordsworth dies), 1880 (great Nihilist trial in St. Petersburg), 1900 (Rafe’s father born in Trenton), 1902 (Braque leaves Le Havre to study painting in Paris), 1914 (Joyce begins Ulysses; war begins in Europe), 1926 (Rafe’s parents marry in Ithaca), 1936 (Rafe is four years old). Where the present should have stood, a block was torn down, and the numbering began again with 2000, a boring progressive edifice. Rafe diverted his attention from the window to the poster above it. The poster ingeniously advertised Jomar Instant Coffee. The gimmick was a finely corrugated cellulose sheet in which had been embedded two positions of a depicted man’s eyeball, arm, and lips. Ideally, from one angle the man was seen holding a cup of coffee to his mouth, smiling, and in flavorful ecstasy rolling his iris to the top of his egg-shaped eye; from another angle he appeared with the cup lowered, his eyeball also lowered, and his lips parted in downright laughter. Rafe’s closeness and the curvature of the bus roof prevented the illusion from working with complete success. Both arms, both eyeballs were always present, though with seesaw intensity as Rafe ducked his head up and down. Either the Jomar man’s openmouthed grin was intersected by the ghost of his closed-mouthed smile, or the latter was surrounded by the shadow of the former. Rafe began to feel bus-sick. The bus had swung down Seventy-second Street and up Riverside Drive.

He returned to the girl. She was there, beside him, but leaving. Proust jutted from her pocketbook. Her face wore the enamelled look of a person who has emerged from a piece of fiction into the world of real decisions. With a whispering touch, her backside eased past his. Having pulled the green cord, she waited in front of the side doors, her profile a brilliant assault on the daylight. The double-jointed doors flapped open. Pursing her mouth, she managed the step, walked south, and was gone.

The entry of some new passengers forced Rafe deeper into the rear of the bus, yards away from where he had stood with the girl. Bit by bit, in confused order, as word of a disaster first filters in over the wires, he became conscious of the young Negress seated beneath him. Her baby-flat nose was a good glossy place for his attention to rest. When she re-crossed her legs, he noticed the unpatterned breadth of turquoise skirt, the yellow coat clashing with it, the tense henna-tinged hair painfully pulled straight, the hard-to-read foreshortened curves of her face, the hands folded, with an odd precision, in her turquoise lap. She was wearing blue half-gloves; they stopped at the base of her thumbs. It was the hint of grotesqueness needed to make Rafe lustful. Yet the woman, in becoming so desirable, became inaccessible. If Rafe looked at her more steadily than at his previous love, it was because her armor of erotic power rendered her tactually insensitive to long looks. Likewise, because his imaginings concerning himself and the girl were so plainly fantastic, he could indulge them without limit.

The pure life of the mind, for all its quick distances, is soon tedious. Rafe, dwelling again on the actual Negress, observed the prim secretarial carriage of her head, the café-au-lait skin, the sarcastic Caucasian set of her lips. Dress women in sea and sand or pencil lines, they were chapters on the same subject, no more unlike than St. Paul and Paul Tillich. In the end, when he alighted at Eighty-fifth Street, the Negress had dwindled to the thought that he had never seen gloves like that before.

Behind him the bus doors closed: pterodactyl wings. A woman standing on the deserted pavement stared at the long box, never guessing a mobile for a baby was in it. The warm air, moistened by the Hudson, guaranteed spring. Rafe went up the rounded, coral-colored steps, across the checkered lobby floor, and into the tiny scarlet elevator, which was nearly always waiting for him, like a loyal but not slavish dog. Inside his apartment, the baby had just been fed and was laughing; her mother, flushed and sleepy, lay in a slip on the sofa bed.

That invisible gas, goodness, stung Rafe’s eyes and made him laugh, strut, talk nonsense. He held the baby at arm’s height, lowered her until her belly rested on the top of his head, and walked rapidly around the room singing, “I have a little babe, her name is Liz, I think she’s better than she really is, I think she’s better than she ever will be, what ev-er will become of me?”

The baby laughed, “Gkk, ngk!”

The mobile was not a success. His wife had expected a genuine Calder, made of beautiful polished woods, instead of seven rubber birds, with celluloid wings, hung from a piece of coarse wire. Elizabeth wanted to put the birds in her mouth and showed no interest in, perhaps did not even see, their abstract swinging, quite unlike the rapt infant shown on the box.

The baby went to sleep and his wife prepared the dinner in an atmosphere of let-down.

“I saw some funny gloves today,” Rafe called. There was no answer from the kitchen, just the sound of pans.

When dinner came, it was his favorite everything—peas, hamburger, baked potato, cooked to avoid his allergies, served on the eccentric tilting plates in which, newly married, they had sailed the clean seas of sophistication.

It was growing dark, spottily. A curious illusion was unexpectedly created: his wife, irritated because he had failed to answer some question of hers—her questions about his life at the office, so well meant, so understandable in view of her own confined existence, numbed his mind to the extent that not only his recent doings but her questions themselves were obliterated—dropped a triangular piece of bread from her fingers, and the bread, falling to her lap through a width of light, twirled and made a star.

From where he sat, dinner done, smoking a cigarette, Rafe could look across the Hudson to the Palisades, surmounted by seeming villages. A purple sky was being lowered over a yellow one. The Spry sign came on. The sign, which by virtue of brightness and readability dominated their night view, had three stages: Spry (red), Spry (white) FOR BAKING (red), and Spry (white) FOR FRYING (red). Rafe sometimes wondered how it had come to be there. Some executive, no doubt, had noticed the bare roof of the newly acquired waterfront plant. “We could use a Spry sign there,” he murmured to his secretary, whom he had kept late at the office and was driving to her home in Riverdale. The following Monday, the secretary made an interdepartmental memo of J.G.’s remark. The man second in charge of Public Relations (the man first in charge was on vacation in the Poconos), new at the job, seven years out of Yale, and not bold enough to take J.G. with a grain of salt, told a man in the Creative End to draw up a sketch. After three days, the man in Creative did this, basing his sketch upon a 186-pound file of past Spry ads. The man in Public Relations had a boy take it into the head office. J.G., flattered to have his suggestion followed up, wrote on the back, “Turn it slightly south. Nobody at Columbia cooks,” and passed it on, O.K.’ed. The two other executives who saw the sketch (both of whom, by an almost supernatural coincidence, had daughters at Sarah Lawrence threatening marriage) suspected that J.G. was developing power among the stockholders and shrewdly strung along. Bids were requested and submitted. One was accepted. The neon people shaped the tubes. Metalworkers constructed a frame. On a November Tuesday, the kind of blowy day that gives you earache, the sign was set in place by eighteen men, the youngest of whom would some day be an internationally known film actor. At three-thirty, an hour and a half before they were supposed to quit, they knocked off and dispersed, because the goddamn job was done. Thus the Spry sign (thus the river, thus trees, thus babies and sleep) came to be.

Above its winking, the small cities had disappeared. The black of the river was as wide as that of the sky. Reflections sunk in it existed dimly, minutely wrinkled, below the surface. The Spry sign occupied the night with no company beyond the also uncreated but illegible stars.