# Snowing in Greenwich Village

# John Updike

THE MAPLES HAD moved just the day before to West Thirteenth Street, and that evening they had Rebecca Cune over, because now they were so close. A tall, always slightly smiling girl with an absent-minded manner, she allowed Richard Maple to slip off her coat and scarf even as she stood gently greeting Joan. Richard, moving with an extra precision and grace because of the smoothness with which the business had been managed—though he and Joan had been married nearly two years, he was still so young-looking that people did not instinctively lay upon him hostly duties; their reluctance worked in him a corresponding hesitancy, so that often it was his wife who poured the drinks, while he sprawled on the sofa in the attitude of a favored and wholly delightful guest—entered the dark bedroom, entrusted the bed with Rebecca’s clothes, and returned to the living room. Her coat had seemed weightless.

Rebecca, seated beneath the lamp, on the floor, one leg tucked under her, one arm up on the Hide-a-Bed that the previous tenants had not as yet removed, was saying, “I had known her, you know, just for the day she taught me the job, but I said O.K. I was living in an awful place called a hotel for ladies. In the halls they had typewriters you put a quarter in.”

Joan, straight-backed on a Hitchcock chair from her parents’ home in Amherst, a damp handkerchief balled in her hand, turned to Richard and explained, “Before her apartment now, Becky lived with this girl and her boyfriend.”

“Yes, his name was Jacques,” Rebecca said.

Richard asked, “You lived with them?” The arch composure of his tone was left over from the mood aroused in him by his successful and, in the dim bedroom, somewhat poignant—as if he were with great tact delivering a disappointing message—disposal of their guest’s coat.

“Yes, and he insisted on having his name on the mailbox. He was terribly afraid of missing a letter. When my brother was in the Navy and came to see me and saw on the mailbox”—with three parallel movements of her fingers she set the names beneath one another—

“Georgene Clyde,

Rebecca Cune,

Jacques Zimmerman,

he told me I had always been such a nice girl. Jacques wouldn’t even move out so my brother would have a place to sleep. He had to sleep on the floor.” She lowered her lids and looked in her purse for a cigarette.

“Isn’t that wonderful?” Joan said, her smile broadening helplessly as she realized what an inane thing it had been to say. Her cold worried Richard. It had lasted seven days without improving. Her face was pale, mottled pink and yellow; this accentuated the Modiglianiesque quality established by her oval blue eyes and her habit of sitting to her full height, her head quizzically tilted and her hands palm upward in her lap.

Rebecca, too, was pale, but in the consistent way of a drawing, perhaps—the weight of her lids and a certain virtuosity about the mouth suggested it—by da Vinci.

“Who would like some sherry?” Richard asked in a deep voice, from a standing position.

“We have some hard stuff if you’d rather,” Joan said to Rebecca; from Richard’s viewpoint the remark, like those advertisements which from varying angles read differently, contained the quite legible declaration that this time he would have to mix the old-fashioneds.

“The sherry sounds fine,” Rebecca said. She enunciated her words distinctly, but in a faint, thin voice that disclaimed for them any consequence.

“I think, too,” Joan said.

“Good.” Richard took from the mantel the eight-dollar bottle of Tio Pepe that the second man on the Spanish-sherry account had stolen for him. So all could share in the drama of it, he uncorked the bottle in the living room. He posingly poured out three glasses, half full, passed them around, and leaned against the mantel (the Maples had never had a mantel before), swirling the liquid, as the agency’s wine expert had told him to do, thus liberating the esters and ethers, until his wife said, as she always did, it being the standard toast in her parents’ home, “Cheers, dears!”

Rebecca continued the story of her first apartment. Jacques had never worked. Georgene never held a job more than three weeks. The three of them contributed to a kitty, to which all enjoyed equal access. Rebecca had a separate bedroom. Jacques and Georgene sometimes worked on television scripts; they pinned the bulk of their hopes onto a serial titled The IBI—I for Intergalactic, or Interplanetary, or something—in Space and Time. One of their friends was a young Communist who never washed and always had money because his father owned half of the West Side. During the day, when the two girls were off working, Jacques flirted with a young Swede upstairs who kept dropping her mop onto the tiny balcony outside their window. “A real bombardier,” Rebecca said. When Rebecca moved into a single apartment for herself and was all settled and happy, Georgene and Jacques offered to bring a mattress and sleep on her floor. Rebecca felt that the time had come for her to put her foot down. She said no. Later, Jacques married a girl other than Georgene.

“Cashews, anybody?” Richard said. He had bought a can at the corner delicatessen, expressly for this visit, though if Rebecca had not been coming he would have bought something else there on some other excuse, just for the pleasure of buying his first thing at the store where in the coming years he would purchase so much and become so familiar.

“No thank you,” Rebecca said. Richard was so far from expecting refusal that out of momentum he pressed them on her again, exclaiming, “Please! They’re so good for you.” She took two and bit one in half.

He offered the dish, a silver porringer given to the Maples as a wedding present, to his wife, who took a greedy handful of cashews and looked so pale and mottled that he asked, “How do you feel?,” not so much forgetting the presence of their guest as parading his concern, quite genuine at that, before her.

“Fine,” Joan said edgily, and perhaps she did.

Though the Maples told some stories—how they had lived in a log cabin in a YMCA camp for the first three months of their married life; how Bitsy Flaner, a mutual friend, was the only girl enrolled in Bentham Divinity School; how Richard’s advertising work brought him into glancing contact with Yogi Berra, who was just as funny as the papers said—they did not regard themselves (that is, each other) as raconteurs, and Rebecca’s slight voice dominated the talk. She had a gift for odd things.

Her rich uncle lived in a metal house, furnished with auditorium chairs. He was terribly afraid of fire. Right before the Depression he had built an enormous boat to take himself and some friends to Polynesia. All his friends lost their money in the crash. He did not. He made money. He made money out of everything. But he couldn’t go on the trip alone, so the boat was still waiting in Oyster Bay, a huge thing, rising thirty feet out of the water. The uncle was a vegetarian. Rebecca had not eaten turkey for Thanksgiving until she was thirteen years old because it was the family custom to go to the uncle’s house on that holiday. The custom was dropped during the war, when the children’s synthetic heels made black marks all over his asbestos floor. Rebecca’s family had not spoken to the uncle since. “Yes, what got me,” Rebecca said, “was the way each new wave of vegetables would come in as if it were a different course.”

Richard poured the sherry around again and, because this made him the center of attention anyway, said, “Don’t some vegetarians have turkeys molded out of crushed nuts for Thanksgiving?”

After a stretch of silence, Joan said, “I don’t know.” Her voice, unused for ten minutes, cracked on the last syllable. She cleared her throat, scraping Richard’s heart.

“What would they stuff them with?” Rebecca asked, dropping an ash into the saucer beside her.

Beyond and beneath the window there arose a clatter. Joan reached the windows first, Richard next, and lastly Rebecca, standing on tiptoe, elongating her neck. Six mounted police, standing in their stirrups, were galloping two abreast down Thirteenth Street. When the Maples’ exclamations had subsided, Rebecca remarked, “They do it every night at this time. They seem awfully jolly, for policemen.”

“Oh, and it’s snowing!” Joan cried. She was pathetic about snow; she loved it so much, and in these last years had seen so little. “On our first night here! Our first real night.” Forgetting herself, she put her arms around Richard, and Rebecca, where another guest might have turned away, or smiled too broadly, too encouragingly, retained without modification her sweet, absent look and studied, through the embracing couple, the scene outdoors. The snow was not taking on the wet street; only the hoods and tops of parked automobiles showed an accumulation.

“I think I’d best go,” Rebecca said.

“Please don’t,” Joan said with an urgency Richard had not expected; clearly she was very tired. Probably the new home, the change in the weather, the good sherry, the currents of affection between herself and her husband that her sudden hug had renewed, and Rebecca’s presence had become in her mind the inextricable elements of one enchanted moment.

“Yes, I think I’ll go because you’re so snuffly and peakèd.”

“Can’t you just stay for one more cigarette? Dick, pass the sherry around.”

“A teeny bit,” Rebecca said, holding out her glass. “I guess I told you, Joan, about the boy I went out with who pretended to be a headwaiter.”

Joan giggled expectantly. “No, honestly, you never did.” She hooked her arm over the back of the chair and wound her hand through the slats, like a child assuring herself that her bedtime has been postponed. “What did he do? He imitated headwaiters?”

“Yes, he was the kind of guy who, when we get out of a taxi and there’s a grate giving off steam, crouches down”—Rebecca lowered her head and lifted her arms—“and pretends he’s the Devil.”

The Maples laughed, less at the words themselves than at the way Rebecca had evoked the situation by conveying, in her understated imitation, both her escort’s flamboyant attitude and her own undemonstrative nature. They could see her standing by the taxi door, gazing with no expression as her escort bent lower and lower, seized by his own joke, his fingers writhing demonically as he felt horns sprout through his scalp, flames lick his ankles, and his feet shrivel into hoofs. Rebecca’s gift, Richard realized, was not that of having odd things happen to her but that of representing, through the implicit contrast with her own sane calm, all things touching her as odd. This evening, too, might appear grotesque in her retelling: “Six policemen on horses galloped by and she cried ‘It’s snowing!’ and hugged him. He kept telling her how sick she was and filling us full of sherry.”

“What else did he do?” Joan eagerly asked.

“At the first place we went to—it was a big nightclub on the roof of somewhere—on the way out he sat down and played the piano until a woman at a harp asked him to stop.”

Richard asked, “Was the woman playing the harp?”

“Yes, she was strumming away.” Rebecca made circular motions with her hands.

“Well, did he play the tune she was playing? Did he accompany her?” Petulance, Richard realized without understanding why, had entered his tone.

“No, he just sat down and played something else. I couldn’t tell what it was.”

“Is this really true?” Joan asked, egging her on.

“And then, at the next place we went to, we had to wait at the bar for a table and I looked around and he was walking among the tables asking people if everything was all right.”

“Wasn’t it awful?” said Joan.

“Yes. Later he played the piano there, too. We were sort of the main attraction. Around midnight he thought we ought to go out to Brooklyn, to his sister’s house. I was exhausted. We got off the subway two stops too early, under the Manhattan Bridge. It was deserted, with nothing going by except black limousines. Miles above our head”—she stared up, as though at a cloud, or the sun—“was the Manhattan Bridge, and he kept saying it was the el. We finally found some steps and two policemen who told us to go back to the subway.”

“What does this amazing man do for a living?” Richard asked.

“He teaches school. He’s quite bright.” She stood up, extending in stretch a long, silvery-white arm. Richard got her coat and scarf and said he’d walk her home.

“It’s only three-quarters of a block,” Rebecca protested in a voice free of any insistent inflection.

“You must walk her home, Dick,” Joan said. “Pick up a pack of cigarettes.” The idea of his walking in the snow seemed to please her, as if she were anticipating how he would bring back with him, in the snow on his shoulders and the coldness of his face, all the sensations of the walk she was not well enough to risk.

“You should stop smoking for a day or two,” he told her.

Joan waved them goodbye from the head of the stairs.

The snow, invisible except around streetlights, exerted a fluttering pressure on their faces. “Coming down hard now,” he said.

“Yes.”

At the corner, where the snow gave the green light a watery blueness, her hesitancy in following him as he turned to walk with the light across Thirteenth Street led him to ask, “It is this side of the street you live on, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I thought I remembered from the time we drove you down from Boston.” The Maples had been living in the West Eighties then. “I remember I had an impression of big buildings.”

“The church and the butcher’s school,” Rebecca said. “Every day about ten when I’m going to work the boys learning to be butchers come out for an intermission all bloody and laughing.”

Richard looked up at the church; the steeple was fragmentarily silhouetted against the scattered lit windows of a tall apartment building on Seventh Avenue. “Poor church,” he said. “It’s hard in this city for a steeple to be the tallest thing.”

Rebecca said nothing, not even her habitual “Yes.” He felt rebuked for being preachy. In his embarrassment he directed her attention to the first next thing he saw, a poorly lettered sign above a great door. “Food Trades Vocational High School,” he read aloud. “The people upstairs told us that the man before the man before us in our apartment was a wholesale-meat salesman who called himself a Purveyor of Elegant Foods. He kept a woman in the apartment.”

“Those big windows up there,” Rebecca said, pointing up at the top story of a brownstone, “face mine across the street. I can look in and feel we are neighbors. Someone’s always there; I don’t know what they do for a living.”

After a few more steps they halted, and Rebecca, in a voice that Richard imagined to be slightly louder than her ordinary one, said, “Do you want to come up and see where I live?”

“Sure.” It seemed far-fetched to refuse.

They descended four concrete steps, opened a shabby orange door, entered an overheated half-basement lobby, and began to climb flights of wooden stairs. Richard’s suspicion on the street that he was trespassing beyond the public gardens of courtesy turned to certain guilt. Few experiences so savor of the illicit as mounting stairs behind a woman’s fanny. Three years ago, Joan had lived in a fourth-floor walkup, in Cambridge. Richard never took her home, even when the whole business, down to the last intimacy, had become routine, without the fear that the landlord, justifiably furious, would leap from his door and devour him as they passed.

Opening her door, Rebecca said, “It’s hot as hell in here,” swearing for the first time in his hearing. She turned on a weak light. The room was small; slanting planes, the underside of the building’s roof, intersected the ceiling and walls and cut large prismatic volumes from Rebecca’s living space. As he moved farther forward, toward Rebecca, who had not yet removed her coat, Richard perceived, on his right, an unexpected area created where the steeply slanting roof extended itself to the floor. Here a double bed was placed. Tightly bounded on three sides, the bed had the appearance not so much of a piece of furniture as of a permanently installed, blanketed platform. He quickly took his eyes from it and, unable to face Rebecca at once, stared at two kitchen chairs, a metal bridge lamp around the rim of whose shade plump fish and helm wheels alternated, and a four-shelf bookcase—all of which, being slender and proximate to a tilting wall, had an air of threatened verticality.

“Yes, here’s the stove on top of the refrigerator I told you about,” Rebecca said. “Or did I?”

The top unit overhung the lower by several inches on all sides. He touched his fingers to the stove’s white side. “This room is quite sort of nice,” he said.

“Here’s the view,” she said. He moved to stand beside her at the windows, lifting aside the curtains and peering through tiny flawed panes into the apartment across the street.

“That guy does have a huge window,” Richard said.

She made a brief agreeing noise of n’s.

Though all the lamps were on, the apartment across the street was empty. “Looks like a furniture store,” he said. Rebecca had still not taken off her coat. “The snow’s keeping up.”

“Yes. It is.”

“Well”—his word was too loud; he finished the sentence too softly—“thanks for letting me see it. I—Have you read this?” He had noticed a copy of Auntie Mame lying on a hassock.

“I haven’t had the time,” she said.

“I haven’t read it either. Just reviews. That’s all I ever read.”

This got him to the door. There, ridiculously, he turned. It was only at the door, he decided in retrospect, that her conduct was quite inexcusable: not only did she stand unnecessarily close, but, by shifting the weight of her body to one leg and leaning her head sidewise, she lowered her height several inches, placing him in a dominating position exactly suited to the broad, passive shadows she must have known were on her face.

“Well—” he said.

“Well.” Her echo was immediate and possibly meaningless.

“Don’t, don’t let the b-butchers get you.” The stammer of course ruined the joke, and her laugh, which had begun as soon as she had seen by his face that he would attempt something funny, was completed ahead of his utterance.

As he went down the stairs she rested both hands on the banister and looked down toward the next landing. “Good night,” she said.

“Night.” He looked up; she had gone into her room. Oh but they were close.