# Who Made Yellow Roses Yellow?

# John Updike

OF THE THREE TELEPHONES in the apartment, the one in the living room rested on a tabouret given to Fred Platt’s grandmother by Henry James, who considered her, the Platts claimed, the only educated woman in the United States. Above this cherrywood gift hung an oval mirror, its frame a patterned involvement of cherubs, acanthus leaves, and half-furled scrolls; its gilt, smooth as butter in the valleys between figures, yielded on the crests of the relief to touches of Watteau brown. Great-Uncle Randy, known for his whims and mustaches, had rescued the mirror from a Paris auction. In the capacious room there was nothing of no intrinsic interest, nothing that would not serve as cause for a narrative, except the three overstuffed pieces installed by Fred’s father—two chairs, facing each other at a distance of three strides, and a crescent-shaped sofa, all covered in spandy-new, navy-blue leather. This blue, and the dark warm wood of inherited cabinets, the twilight colors of aged books, the scarlet and purple of the carpet from Cairo (where Charlotte, Uncle Randy’s wife, had caught a bug and died), and the dismal sonorities of the Seicento Transfiguration on the west wall vibrated around the basal shade of plum. Plum: a color a man can rest in, the one toward which all dressing gowns tend. Reinforcing the repose and untroubled finality of the interior were the several oval shapes. The mirror was one of a family, kin to the feminine ellipse of the coffee table; to the burly arc of Daddy’s sofa, as they never failed to call it; to the ovoid, palely painted base of a Florentine lamp; to the plaster medallion on the ceiling—the one cloud in the sky of the room—and the recurrent, tiny gold seal of the Oxford University Press, whose books, monochrome and Latinate as dons, were among the chief of the senior Platt’s plum-colored pleasures.

Fred, his only son, age twenty-five, dialled a JUdson number. He listened to five burrs before the receiver was picked up, exposing the tail end of a girl’s giggle. Still tittery, she enunciated, “Carson Chem-i-cal.”

“Hello. Is—ah, Clayton Thomas Clayton there, do you know?”

“Mr. Thomas Clayton? Yes, he is. Just one moment, please.” So poor Clayton Clayton had finally got somebody to call him by his middle name, that “Thomas” which his parents must have felt made all the difference between the absurd and the sublime.

“Mr. Clayton’s of-fice,” another young woman said. “About what was it you wished to speak to him?”

“Well, nothing, really. It’s a friend.”

“Just one moment, please.”

After a delay—purely disciplinary, Fred believed—an unexpectedly deep and even melodious voice said, “Yes?”

“Clayton Clayton?”

A pause. “Who is this?”

“Good morning, sir. I represent the Society for the Propagation and Eventual Adoption of the A. D. Spooner Graduated Income Tax Plan. As perhaps you know, this plan calls for an income tax which increases in inverse proportion to income, so that the wealthy are exempted and the poor taxed out of existence. Within five years, Mr. Spooner estimates, poverty would be eliminated: within ten, a thing not even of memory. Word has come to our office—”

“It’s Fred Platt, isn’t it?”

“Word has come to our office that in recent years Providence has so favored thee as to incline thy thoughts the more favorably to the Plan.”

“Fred?”

“Congratulations. You now own the Motorola combination phonograph-and-megaphone. Do you care to try for the Bendix?”

“How long have you been in town? It’s damn good to hear from you.”

“Since April first. It’s a prank of my father’s. Who are all these girls you live in the midst of?”

“Your father called you back from Europe?”

“I’m not sure. I keep forgetting to look up ‘wastrel’ in the dictionary.”

That made Clayton laugh. “I thought you were studying at the Sorbonne.”

“I was, I was.”

“But you’re not now.”

“I’m not now. Moi et la Sorbonne, nous sommes kaput.” When the other was silent, Fred added, “Beaucoup kaput.”

“Look, we should get together,” Clayton said.

“Yes. I was wondering if you eat lunch.”

“When had you thought?”

“Soon?”

“Wait. I’ll check.” Some muffled words—a question with his hand over the mouthpiece. A drawer scraped. “Say, Fred, this is bad. I have something on the go every day this week.”

“So. Well, what about June 21? They say the solstice will be lovely this year.”

“Wait. What about today? I’m free today, they just told me.”

“Today?” Fred had to see Clayton soon, but immediately seemed like a push. “Comme vous voulez, monsieur. One-ish?”

“All right, uh—could you make it twelve-thirty? I have a good bit to do.…”

“Just as easy. There’s a Chinese place on East Forty-ninth Street run by Australians. Excellent murals of Li Po embracing the moon in the Yalu, plus the coronation of Henri Quatre.”

“I wonder, could that be done some other time? As I say, there’s some stuff here at the office. Do you know Shulman’s? It’s on Third Avenue, a block from here, so that—”

“Press of work, eh?”

“You said it,” Clayton said, evidently sensing no irony. “Then I’ll see you then.”

“In all the old de dum de dumpty that this heart of mine embraces.”

“Pardon?”

“See you then.”

“Twelve-thirty at Shulman’s.”

“Absolutely.”

“So long.”

“À bientôt. Très bientôt, mon chéri.”

The first impulse after a humiliation is to look into a mirror. The heavy Parisian-looking glass, hung on two long wires, leaned inches from the wall. A person standing would see reflected in it not his head but the carpet, some furniture, and perhaps, in the upper portion of the oval, his shoes and cuffs. By tilting his chair Fred could see his face; thus a momentary escapee from a hectic cocktail party checks his flushed mask in the bathroom mirror. Here, in this silent overstuffed room, his excited appearance annoyed him. Between his feverish attempt to rekindle friendship—his mind skidding, his tongue wagging—and Clayton’s response an embarrassing and degrading disproportion had existed.

Until now it had seemed foolishly natural for Clayton to offer him a job. Reportedly he had asked Bim Blackwood to jump Harcourt for a publicity job at Carson Chemical. Bim had said, without seeing anything funny in the word, that Clayton had lots of “power” at Carson. “In just three years, he’s near the top. He’s a killer. Really.”

It had been hard to gather from Bim’s description exactly what Clayton did. As Bim talked on, flicking at the stiff eave of brown hair that overhung his forehead with a conceited carelessness, he would say anything to round out a sentence, never surrendering his right to be taken seriously. “It’s an octopus,” he had asserted. “You know, everything is chemicals ultimately. Clayton told me the first thing he was given to do was help design the wrapper for an ammoniated chewing gum they were just putting out. He said the big question was whether chalk-white or mint-green suggested better a clean feeling in the mouth. They had a survey on it; it cost thousands and thousands—thousands of little men going inside people’s mouths. Of course he doesn’t draw any more; he consults. Can you imagine doing nothing all day but consult? On pamphlets, you know, and ‘flyers’—what are flyers anyway?—and motion pictures to show to salesmen to show them how to explain the things they sell. He’s terribly involved with television; he told me a horrible story about a play about Irish peasants the Carson Chemical Hour was putting on and at the last minute it dawned on everybody that these people were organic farmers. Clayton Clayton saw it through. The killer instinct.”

Clayton hadn’t had to go into the Army. Shadowy lungs, or something. That was the thing about poor children: they acquired disabilities which give them the edge in later life. It’s unjust, to expect a man without a handicap to go far.

Fred’s position was not desperate. An honorable place in the family investments firm was not, as Father had said, with his arch way of trotting out clichés as if they were moderately obscure literary quotations, “the fate worse than death.” Furthermore—he was a great man for furthermores—anyone who imagined that the publicity arm of Carson Chemical was an ivory tower compared with Brauer, Chappell & Platt lived in a fool’s paradise.

Yet, viewed allegorically, the difference seemed great. Something about all this, perhaps the chaste spring greenery of Central Park, which from these windows was spread out with the falcon’s-eye perspective of a medieval map, suggested one of those crossroads in The Faerie Queene. Fred had loved The Faerie Queene—its tiny type, its archaic spellings, its perfect uselessness.

Besides, he had been very kind to Clayton—gotten him onto the Quaff, really. Sans Quaff, where would Clayton be? Not that Clayton need consider any of this. Hell, it wasn’t as if Fred were asking for something; he was offering something. He pushed back the chair a few feet—so a full view of himself was available in the tilted mirror: a tall, ascetic youth, dressed in darkest gray. An unchurched Episcopalian, Fred was half in love with the clergy.

Entering, late, the appointed restaurant, he instantly spotted Clayton Clayton standing at the bar. That three years had passed, that the place was smoky and crowded with interchangeable men, did not matter; an eclipsing head bowed, and the fragment of cheek then glimpsed, though in itself nothing but a daub of white, not only communicated to Fred a single human identity but stirred in him warm feelings for the Quaff, college, his youth generally, and even America, with its freedom from Europe’s stony class distinctions. Fred had inherited that trick of the rich of seeming to do everything out of friendship, but he was three generations removed from the founding of the wealth, and a manner of business had become, in him, a way of life; his dealings were in fact at the mercy of his affections. Grotesquely close to giggling, he walked up to his man and intoned, “Ego sum via, vita, veritas.”

Clayton turned, grinned, and pumped Fred’s hand. “How are you, Fred?”

Members of the Quaff did not ask one another how they were; Fred had supposed ex-members also did not. Finding they did baffled him. He could not think of the joke to turn such a simple attack aside. “Pretty well,” he conceded and, as if these words were an exorcism enabling the gods of fatuity to descend and dwell in his lips, heard himself add, in what seemed full solemnity, “How are you?”

“I’m doing”—Clayton paused, nodding once, giving the same words a new import—“pretty well.”

“Yes, everybody says.”

“I was glad I could make it today. I really am up to my ears this week.” Confidingly: “I’m in a crazy business.”

On one wall of the restaurant were Revolutionary murals, darkened perhaps by smoke and time but more likely by the painter’s belief that history is murky. “Ah,” said Fred, gesturing. “The Renaissance Popes in Hell.”

“Would you like one of these?” Clayton touched the glass in front of him; it contained that collegiate brew, beer.

How tender of Clayton still to drink beer! By a trick of vision the liquid stood unbounded by glass. The sight of that suspended amber cylinder, like his magic first glimpse of Clayton’s face, conjured in Fred an illusion of fondness. This time he curbed his tendency to babble and said, anxious to be honest, certain that the merest addition of the correct substance—the simple words exchanged by comrades—would reform the alchemy of the relationship, “Yes. I would like one. Quite a bit.”

“I tell you. Let’s grab a table and order from there. They’ll let us stand here all day.”

Fred felt not so much frustrated as deflected, as if the glass that wasn’t around the beer was around Clayton.

“There’s a table.” Clayton picked up his stein, placed a half-dollar in the center of the circle its base had occupied, and shouldered away from the bar. He led the way into a booth, past two old men brandishing their topcoats. Inside, the high partitions shielded them from much of the noise of the place. Clayton took two menus from behind the sugar and handed one to Fred. “We had better order the food first, then ask for the beer. If you ask for the drinks first, they just run off.” He was perfect: the medium-short dry-combed hair, the unimpeachable medium-gray suit, the buttonless collar, the genially dragged vowels, the little edges of efficiency bracing the consonants. A few traces of the scholarship freshman from some Maryland high school who had come down to the Quaff on Candidates’ Night with an armful of framed sports cartoons remained—the not smoking, the tucked-in chin and the attendant uplook of the boyishly big eyes, and the skin condition that placed on the flank of each jaw a constellation of red dots. Even these vestiges fitted into the picture, by lending him the unthreatening youthful look desired in New York executives. It was just this suggestion of inexperience that in his genuine inexperience Clayton was working to suppress. “See anything you like,” he asked with a firmness not interrogative.

Fred decided to make a meal of it. The family apartment was low on provender.

“I think maybe a lamb chop.”

“I don’t see them on the menu.”

“I don’t either.”

Raising his hand to the level of his ear and snapping his fingers, Clayton summoned a waiter. “This gentleman wants a lamb chop. Do you have them?”

The waiter didn’t bother to answer, just wrote it down.

“I think I might try,” Clayton went on, “the chopped sirloin with mushroom sauce. Beans instead of the peas, if you will. And I’m having another glass of Ballantine. Shall I make that two, Fred?”

“Do you have any decent German beer? Würzburger? Or Löwenbräu?”

The request materialized the man, who had been serving them with only his skimpy professional self. Now he smiled, and stood bodied forth as a great-boned Teuton in the prime of his fifties, with a segmented shining bald head and portentous ears covered by a diaphanous fuzz that brought to the dignity his head already possessed a certain silky glamour. “I believe, sir, we have the Löwenbräu. I don’t think we stock the Würzburger, sir.”

“O.K. Whatever you do stock, then.”

Though Fred wanted this to be Clayton’s show, he had called into being a genie—cloying, zealous, delighted to have his cavernous reserve of attentiveness tapped. The waiter bowed and indeed whispered, making an awkward third party of Clayton, “If not the Löwenbräu, would an English stout do? A nice Guinness, sir?”

“The Löwenbräu will be fine.” Trying to bring Clayton back into it, Fred asked him, “Do you want to try one? Fewer bubbles than Ballantine. Less tingle for more ferment.”

Clayton’s answering laugh would have been agreeable if he had not, while uttering it, lowered his eyelids, showing that he conceived of this as a decision whereby he stood to gain or lose. “No, I think I’ll stick to Ballantine.” He looked Fred needlessly in the eyes. When Clayton felt threatened, the middle sector of his face clouded over; the area between his brows and nostrils became sulky.

Fred was both repelled and touched. The expression was exactly that worn by the adolescent Clayton at the Quaff candidates’ punches, when all the dues members, dead to the magazine, showed up resplendent in elbow-patched tweeds and tight collar pins, eager for martinis, as full of chatter and strut as a flock of whooping cranes bent on proving they were not extinct yet. Fred pitied Clayton, remembering the days when Fred alone, a respected if sophomore member, was insisting that the kid with the gag name be elected to the Quaff. The point was he could draw. Wonky, sure. He was right out of the funny papers. But at least his hands had fingers you could count. Pathetic, of course, to have the drawings framed, but his parents put him up to that—anybody who’d call a defenseless baby Clayton Clayton.… He wore cocoa-colored slacks and sport shirts. They’d wear out. If he was sullen, he was nervous. The point was, If we don’t get anybody on the magazine who can draw we’ll be forced to run old daguerreotypes of Chester Arthur and the Conkling Gang.

“Do you see much of Anna Spooner?” Clayton asked, referring back, perhaps unconsciously, to Fred’s earlier mistake, his mention of the bad-taste income-tax plan of their friend A. D. Spooner, nicknamed “Anno Domini” and eventually “Anna.”

“Once or twice. I haven’t been back that long. He said he kept running into you at the Old Grads’ Marching Society.”

“Once in a while.”

“You don’t sound too enthusiastic.”

“I hadn’t meant to. I mean I hadn’t meant not to. He’s about the same. Same tie, same jokes. He never thanks me when I buy him a drink. I don’t mean the money bothers me. It’s one of those absurd little things. I shouldn’t even mention it.”

The waiter brought the beers. Fred stared into his Löwenbräu and breathed the word “Yeah.”

“How long have you been back?”

“Two weeks, I guess.”

“That’s right. You said. Well, tell me about it. What’ve you been doing for three years?” His hands were folded firmly on the table, conference-style. “I’m interested.”

Fred laughed outright at him. “There isn’t that much. In the Army I was in Germany in the Quartermaster Corps.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. Typed. Played blackjack, faro, Rook.”

“Do you find it’s changed you much?”

“I type faster. And my chest now is a mass of pornographic tattoos.”

Clayton laughed a little. “It just interests me. I know that psychologically the effect on me of not going in is—is genuine. I feel not exactly guilty, but it’s something that most of the men of our generation have gone through. Not to seems incomplete.”

“It should, it should. I bet you can’t even rev out a Bowling Bunting H-4 jet-cycle tetrameter. As for shooting a bazooka! Talk of St. Teresa’s spiritual experiences—”

“It’s impressive, how little it’s changed you. I wonder if I’m changed. I do like the work, you know. People are always slamming advertising, but I’ve found out it’s a pretty damn essential thing in our economy.”

When the waiter came and set their platters before them, Clayton set to with a disconcerting appetite, forking in the food as often with his left hand as his right, pausing only to ask questions. “Then you went back to Europe.”

“Then I went back to Europe.”

“Why? I mean what did you do? Did you do any writing?”

In recent years Fred’s literary intelligence had exerted itself primarily in the invention of impeccable but fruitless puns. Parcel Proust. Or Supple Simon. Supple Simon met a Neiman / Fellow at the Glee Club, gleamin’. / Said Supple Simon, “Tell me, Fellow / Who made yellow roses yellow?”

“Why, yes,” Fred told Clayton. “Quite a bit. I’ve just completed a three-volume biography of the great Hungarian actress, Juxta Pose.”

“No, actually. What did you do in Paris?”

“Actually, I sat in a chair. The same chair whenever I could. It was a straw chair in the sidewalk area of a restaurant on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. In the summer and spring the tables are in the open, but when it gets cold they enclose the area with large windows. It’s best then. Everybody except you sits inside the restaurant, where it’s warm. It’s best of all at breakfast, around eleven of a nippy morning, with your café and croissant avec du beurre and your—what’s the word?—coude all on a little table the size of a tray, and people outside the window trying to sell ballons to Christmas tourists.”

“You must know French perfectly. It annoys the hell out of me that I don’t know any.”

“Oui, pardon, zut! and alors! are all you need for ordinary conversation. Say them after me: oui—the lips so—par-don—”

“The reason you probably don’t write more,” Clayton said, “is that you have too much taste. Your critical sense is always a jump ahead of your creative urge.” Getting no response, he went on, “I haven’t been doing much drawing either. Except roughing out ideas. But I plan to come back to it.”

“I know you do. I know you will.”

That was what Clayton wanted to hear. He loved work; it was all he knew how to do. His type saw competition as the spine of the universe. His Quaff career had been all success, all adaptation and good sense, so that in his senior year Clayton was president, and everybody said he alone was keeping silly old Quaff alive, when in fact the club, with its delicate ethic of frivolity, had withered under him. The right sort had stopped showing up.

Clayton had a forkful of hamburger poised between the plate and his mouth. “What does your father want?” In went the hamburger.

“My father seems to fascinate you. He is a thin man in his late fifties. He sits at one end of an enormous long room filled with priceless things. He is wearing a purple dressing gown and trying to read a book. But he feels the room is tipping. So he wants me to get in there with him and sit at the other end to keep the balance.”

“No. I didn’t mean—”

“He wants me to get a job. Know of one?” So the crucial question was out, stated like a rebuke.

Clayton carefully chewed. “What sort?”

“I’ve already been offered a position in Brauer, Chappell & Platt. A fine old law firm. I’d have to go to law school, a three-year slog. I’m looking for something with a lower entry bar.”

“In publishing?”

Stalling, stalling. “Or advertising.”

Clayton set down his fork. “Gee. You should be able to get something.”

“I wouldn’t know why. I have no experience. I can’t use my father’s contacts, that wouldn’t be the game. Using him to pull out.”

“I wish you had been here about six months ago. There was an opening up at Carson, and I asked Bim Blackwood, but he didn’t want to make the jump. Speaking of Bim, he’s certainly come along.”

“Come along? Where to?”

“You know. He seems more mature. I feel he’s gotten a hold of himself. His view of things is better proportioned.”

“That’s very perceptive. Who else do we know who’s come along?”

“Well, I would say Harry Ducloss has. I was talking last week with a man Harry works for.”

“He said he’s come along?”

“He said he thought highly of him.”

“ ‘Thought highly,’ ” Fred said. “Fermann was always thinking highly of people.”

“I saw Fermann in the street the other day. Boy!”

“Not coming along?”

Clayton lifted his wrists so the waiter could clear away his plate. “It’s just, it’s”—with a peculiar intensity, as if Fred had often thought the same thing but never so well expressed it—“something to see those tin gods again.”

“Would you young men like dessert?” the waiter asked. “Coffee?” To Fred: “We have nice freshly baked Apfelstrudel. Or Bienenstiche. Very nice. They are made right in the kitchen ovens.”

Fred deferred to Clayton. “Do you have time for coffee?”

Clayton craned his neck to see the clock. “Eight of two.” He looked at Fred apologetically. “To tell the truth—”

“No coffee,” Fred told the waiter.

“Oh, let’s have it. It’ll take just a few minutes.”

“No. I have all afternoon but I don’t want to delay a workingman.”

“They won’t miss me. I’m not that indispensable. Are you sure you don’t want any?”

“Positive.”

“All ri-i-ght,” Clayton said in the dragged-out, musical tone of a parent acceding to a demand that will only do the child harm. “Could I have the check, please, waiter?”

“Certainly, sir.” The something sarcastic about that “sir” was meant for Fred to see.

The check came to $3.79. When Fred reached for his wallet, Clayton said, “Keep that in your pocket. This is on me.”

“Don’t be a fool. The lunch was my idea.”

“No, please. Let me take this.”

Fred dropped a five-dollar bill on the table.

“No, look,” Clayton said. “I know you have the money—”

“Money! We all have money.”

Clayton, at last detecting anger, looked up timidly, his irises in the top of his too-big eyes, his chin tucked in. “Please. You were always quite kind to me. You went out on a limb for me. I knew that.”

It was like a plain girl opening her mouth in the middle of a kiss. Fred wordlessly took back his five. Clayton handed four ones and two quarters to the waiter and said, “That’s right.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Thanks a lot,” Fred said to Clayton as they moved toward the door.

“It’s—” Clayton shook his head slightly. “You can get the next one.”

“Merci beaucoup, monsieur.”

“I hope you didn’t mind coming to this place.”

“A great place. Vy, sey sought I vuss Cherman.”

Outside, the pavement glittered as if cement were precious; Third Avenue, disencumbered of the el, seemed as spacious and queenly as a South American boulevard. In the harsh light of the two-o’clock sun, blemishes invisible in the shadows of the restaurant could be noticed on the skin of Clayton’s face—an uneven redness on the flesh of the nose, two spots on his forehead, a flaky area partially hidden beneath an eyebrow. Clayton’s feet tended to shuffle backward; he was conscious of his skin, or anxious to get back to work. Fred stood still, making it clear he was travelling in the other direction. Clayton did not feel free to go. “You really want a job in advertising?”

“Forget it. I don’t really.”

“I’ll keep on the lookout.”

“Don’t go to any trouble, but thanks anyway.”

“Thank you, for heaven’s sake. I really enjoyed this. It’s been good. Those were great old days.”

For a moment Fred felt regret; he had an impulse to walk a forgiving distance with Clayton.

But his Quaff mate, helplessly offensive, sighed and said, “Well. Back to the salt mines.”

“Well put.” Fred lifted his hand in a benign ministerial gesture. “Ye are the salt of the earth. La lumière du monde. The light of the world. Fils de St. Louis, montez au ciel!”

Clayton, bewildered by the foreign language, backed a step away and with an uncertain jerk of his hand affirmed, “See you.”

“Oui. Le roi est un bon homme. Le crayon de ma tante est sur la table de mon chat. Baisez mes douces fesses. Merci. Merci. Meaning thank you. Thanks again.”