# Sunday Teasing

# John Updike

SUNDAY MORNING: waking, he felt long as a galaxy, and just lacked the will to get up, to unfurl the great sleepy length beneath the covers and go be disillusioned in the ministry by some servile, peace-of-mind-peddling preacher. If it wasn’t peace of mind, it was the integrated individual, and if it wasn’t the integrated individual, it was the power hidden within each one of us. Never a stern old commodity like sin or remorse, never an open-faced superstition. So Arthur decided, without pretending that it was the preferable course as well as the easier, to stay home and read St. Paul.

His wife fussed around the apartment with a too-determined silence; whenever he read the Bible, she acted as if he were playing solitaire without having first invited her to play rummy, or as if he were delivering an oblique attack on Jane Austen and Henry Green, whom she mostly read. Trying to bring her into the Sunday-morning club, he said, “Here’s my grandfather’s favorite passage: First Corinthians eleven, verse three. ‘But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.’ He loved reading that to my mother. It infuriated her.”

A mulish perplexity ruffled Macy’s usually smooth features. “What? The head? The head of every man. What does ‘the head’ mean exactly? I’m sorry, I just don’t understand.”

If he had been able to answer her immediately, he would have done so with a smile, but, though the sense of “head” in the text was perfectly clear, he couldn’t find a synonym. After a silence he said, “It’s so obvious.”

“Read me the passage again. I really didn’t hear it.”

“No,” he said.

“Come on, please. ‘The head of the man is God …’ ”

“No.”

She abruptly turned and went into the kitchen. “All you do is tease,” she said from in there. “You think it’s so funny.” He hadn’t been teasing her at all, but her saying it put the idea into his head.

They were having a friend to the midday meal that Sunday, Leonard Byrne, a Jewish friend who, no matter what the discussion was about, turned it to matters of the heart and body. “Do you realize,” he said halfway through the salad, a minute after a round of remarks concerning the movie Camille had unexpectedly died, “that in our home it was nothing for my father to kiss me? When I’d come home from summer camp, he’d actually embrace me—physically embrace me. No inhibitions about it at all. In my home, it was nothing for men physically to show affection for one another. I remember my uncle when he came to visit had no inhibitions about warmly embracing my father. Now, that’s one thing I find repugnant, personally repugnant to me, about the American home. That there is none of that. It’s evident that the American male has some innate fear of being mistaken for a homosexual. But why, that’s the interesting thing, why should he be so protective of his virility? Why shouldn’t the American father kiss the American son, when it’s done in Italy, in Russia, in France?”

“It’s the pioneer,” Macy said; she seldom volunteered her opinions, and in this case, Arthur felt, did it only to keep Leonard from running on and on and embarrassing himself. Now she was stuck with the words “It’s the pioneer,” which, to judge from her face, were beginning to seem idiotic to her. “Those men had to be virile,” she gamely continued, “they were out there alone, with Indians and bears.”

“By the way,” Leonard said, resting his elbow on the very edge of the table and tilting his head toward her, for suaveness, “do you know, it has been established beyond all doubt that the American pioneer was a drunkard? But that’s not the point. Yes, people say, ‘the pioneer,’ but I can’t quite see how that affects me, as a second-generation American.”

“That’s it,” Arthur told him. “It doesn’t. You just said yourself that your family wasn’t American. They kissed each other. Now, take me. I’m an American. Eleventh-generation German. White, Protestant, Gentile, small-town, middle-class. I am pure American. And do you know, I have never seen my father kiss my mother. Never.”

Leonard, of course, was outraged (“That’s shocking,” he said. “That is truly shocking”), but Macy’s reaction was what Arthur had angled for. It was hard to separate her perturbation at the announcement from the perturbation caused by her not knowing if he was lying or not. “That’s not true,” she told Leonard, but then asked Arthur, “Is it?”

“Of course it’s true,” he said, talking more to Leonard than to Macy. “Our family dreaded body contact. Years went by without my touching my mother. When I went to college, she got into the habit of hugging me goodbye, and now does it whenever we go home. But in my teens, when she was younger, there was nothing of the sort.”

“You know, Arthur, that really frightens me,” Leonard said.

“Why? Why should it? It never occurred to my father to manhandle me. He used to carry me when I was little, but when I got too heavy, he stopped. Just like my mother stopped dressing me when I could do it myself.” Arthur decided to push the proposition further, since nothing he had said since “I have never seen my father kiss my mother” had aroused as much interest. “After a certain age, the normal American boy is raised by people who just see in him a source of income—movie-house managers, garage attendants, people in luncheonettes. The man who ran the luncheonette where I ate did nothing but cheat us out of our money and crab about the noise we made, but I loved that man like a father.”

“That’s terrible, Arthur,” Leonard said. “In my family we didn’t really trust anybody outside the family. Not that we didn’t have friends. We had lots of friends. But it wasn’t quite the same. Macy, your mother kissed you, didn’t she?”

“Oh, yes. All the time. And my father.”

“Ah, but Macy’s parents are atheists,” Arthur said.

“They’re Unitarians,” she said.

Arthur continued, “To go back to your why this should be so. What do we know about the United States other than the fact that it was settled by pioneers? It is a Protestant country, perhaps the only one. It and Norway. Now, what is Protestantism? A vision of attaining God with nothing but the mind. Nothing but the mind alone on a mountaintop.”

“Yes, yes, of course. We know that,” Leonard said, though in truth Arthur had just stated (he now remembered) not a definition of Protestantism but Chesterton’s definition of Puritanism.

“In place of the bureaucratic, interceding Church,” Arthur went on, trying to correct himself, flushing because his argument had chased him into the sacred groves of his mind, “Luther’s notion of Christ is substituted. The reason why in Catholic countries everybody kisses each other is that it’s a huge family—God is a family of three, the Church is a family of millions, even heretics are kind of black sheep of the family. Whereas the Protestant lives all by himself, inside of himself. Fide sola. Man should be lonely.”

“Yes, yes,” Leonard said, puzzling Arthur; he had meant the statements to be debatable.

Arthur felt his audience was bored, because they were eating again, picking at the anchovies and croutons. He said, as a punch line, “I know when we have kids I’m certainly not going to kiss Macy in front of them.”

It was too harsh a thing to say, too bold; he was too excited. Macy said nothing, did not even look up, but her face was tense with an accusatory meekness.

“No, I don’t mean that,” Arthur said. “It’s all lies, lies, lies, lies. My family was very close.”

Macy said to Leonard softly, “Don’t you believe it. He’s been telling the truth.”

“I know it,” Leonard said. “I’ve always felt that about Arthur’s home ever since I met him. I really have.”

And though Leonard could console himself with this supposed insight, something uncongenial had been injected into the gathering, and he became sullen; his mood clouded the room, weighed on their temples like smog, and when, hours later, he left, both Arthur and Macy were unwilling to let him go because he had not had a good time. In a guilty spurt of hospitality, they chattered to him of future arrangements. Leonard walked down the stairs with his hat at an angle less jaunty than when he had come up those stairs—a somehow damp angle, as if he had confused his inner drizzle with a state of outer weather.

Suppertime came. Macy said that she didn’t feel well and couldn’t eat a bite. Arthur put Benny Goodman’s 1938 Carnegie Hall concert on the record-player and, rousing his wife from the Sunday Times, insisted that she, who had been raised on Scarlatti and Purcell, take notice of Jess Stacy’s classic piano solo on “Sing, Sing, Sing,” which he played twice, for her benefit. He prepared some chicken-with-rice soup for himself, mixing the can with just half a can of water, since it would be for only one person and need not be too much thinned. The soup, heated to a simmer, looked so wholesome that he asked Macy if she really didn’t want any. She looked up and thought. “Just a cupful,” she said, which left him enough to fill a large bowl—plenty, though not a luxurious plenitude.

“Mm. That was so good,” she said after finishing.

“Feel better?”

“Slightly.”

Macy was reading through a collection of short stories, and Arthur brought the rocking chair from the bedroom and joined her by the lamp, with his paperback copy of The Tragic Sense of Life. Here again she misunderstood him; he knew that his reading Unamuno depressed her, and he was reading the book not to depress her but to get the book finished and depress her no longer. She knew nothing of the contents except for his remark one time that according to the author the source of religion is our unwillingness to die; yet she was suspicious.

“Why don’t you ever read anything except scary philosophy?” she asked him.

“It isn’t scary,” he said. “The man’s a Christian, sort of.”

“You should read some fiction.”

“I will, I will, as soon as I finish this.”

Perhaps half an hour passed. “Oh,” Macy said, dropping her book to the floor. “That’s so terrible, it’s so awful.”

He looked at her inquiringly. She was close to tears. “There’s a story in here,” she explained. “It just makes you sick. I don’t want to think about it.”

“See, if you’d read Kierkegaard instead of squalid fiction—”

“No, really. I don’t even think it’s a good story, it’s so awful.”

He read the story himself, and Macy moved into the sling chair facing him. He was conscious of her body as clouds of pale color beyond the edge of the page, like a dawn, stirring with gentle unease. “Very good,” Arthur said when he was done. “Quite moving.”

“It’s so horrible,” Macy said. “Why was he so awful to his wife?”

“It’s all explained. He was out of his caste. He was trapped. A perfectly nice man, corrupted by bad luck.”

“How can you say that? That’s so ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous! Why, Macy, the whole pathos of the story lies in the fact that the man, for all his selfishness and cruelty, loves the woman. After all, he’s telling the story, and if the wife emerges as a sympathetic character, it’s because that’s the way he sees her. The description of her at the train—here—‘As the train glided away she turned toward me her face, calm and so sweet and which, in the instant before it vanished, appeared a radiant white heart.’ ” The story, clumsily translated from the French, was titled “Un Coeur blanc.” “And then, later, remembering—‘It gladdens me that I was able then to simulate a depth of affection that I did not at that time feel. She too generously repaid me, and in that zealous response was there not her sort of victory?’ That’s absolutely sympathetic, you see. It’s a terrific image—this perceptive man caged in his own weak character.”

To his surprise, Macy had begun to cry. Tears mounted from the lower lids of eyes still looking at him. “Macy,” he said, kneeling by her chair and touching his forehead to hers. He ardently wished her well at that moment, yet his actions seemed hurried and morbid. “What is it? Of course I feel sorry for the woman.”

“You said he was a nice man.”

“I didn’t mean it. I meant that the horror of the story lies in the fact that the man does understand, that he does love the woman.”

“It just shows, it shows how different we are.”

“No we’re not. We’re exactly alike. Our noses”—he touched hers, then his—“are alike as two peas, our mouths like two turnips, our chins like two hamsters.” She laughed sobbingly, but the silliness of his refutation tended to confirm the truth of her remark.

He held her as long as her crying remained strenuous, and when it relented, she moved to the sofa and lay down, saying, “It’s awful when you have an ache and don’t know if it’s your head or your ear or your tooth.”

He put the palm of his hand on her forehead. He could never tell about fevers. Her skin felt warm, but then human beings were warm things. “Have you taken your temperature?”

“I don’t know where the thermometer is. Broken, probably.” She lay in a forsaken attitude, with one arm, the bluish underside uppermost, extended outward, supported in midair by the limits of its flexure. “Oog,” she said, sticking out her tongue. “This room is a mess.” The Bible had never been replaced in the row of books; it lay on its side, spanning four secular volumes. Several glasses, drained after dinner, stood like castle sentries on the windowsill, the mantel, and the lowest shelf of the bookcase. Leonard had left his rubbers under the table. The jacket of the Goodman record lay on the rug, and the Sunday Times, that manifold summation of a week’s confusion, was oppressively everywhere. Arthur’s soup bowl was still on the table; Macy’s cup, cockeyed in the saucer, rested by her chair, along with Unamuno and the collection of short stories. “It’s always so awful,” she said. “Why don’t you ever help to keep the room neat?”

“I will, I will. Now you go to bed.” He guided her into the other room and took her temperature. She kept the thermometer in her mouth as she undressed and got into her nightgown. He read her temperature as 98.8°. “Very, very slight,” he told her. “I prescribe sleep.”

“I look so pale,” she said in front of the bathroom mirror.

“We never should have discussed Camille.” When she was in bed, her face pink against the white pillow and the rest of her covered, he said, “You and Garbo. Tell me how Garbo says, ‘You’re fooling me.’ ”

“You’re fooling me,” she said in a fragile Swedish whisper.

Back in the living room, Arthur returned the books to the shelves, tearing neat strips from the Times garden section as bookmarks. He assembled the newspaper and laid it in the kitchen next to the trash can. He stood holding Leonard’s rubbers for ten seconds, then dropped them in a corner. He took the record off the phonograph, slipped it into its envelope, and hid it in the closet with the others.

Lastly, he collected the dishes and glasses and washed them. As he stood at the sink, his hands in water which, where the suds thinned and broke, showed a silvery gray, the Sunday’s events repeated themselves in his mind, bending like nacreous flakes around a central infrangible irritant, becoming the perfect and luminous thought: You don’t know anything.