# His Finest Hour

# John Updike

FIRST THEY HEARD, at eight p.m., the sound of a tumbler shattering. It was a distinct noise, tripartite: the crack of the initial concussion, the plump, vegetal pop of the disintegration, and the gossip of settling fragments. The glass might have been hurled within their own living room. To George this showed how thin the walls were. The walls were thin, the ceiling flaked, the furniture smelled ratty, the electricity periodically failed. The rooms were tiny, the rent was monstrous, the view was dull. George Chandler hated New York City. A native of Arizona, he felt that the unclean air here was crowded with spirits constantly cheating him. As the sincere Christian examines each occurrence for the fingerprints of the Providential hand, George read into each irregular incident—a greeting in the subway, an unscheduled knock on the door—possible financial loss. His rule was, Sit tight. This he did, not raising his eyes from the book with which he was teaching himself Arabic.

Rosalind, taller than her husband and less cautious, uncrossed her long legs and said, “Mrs. Irva must have dropsy.”

George didn’t want to talk about it, but he could seldom resist correcting her. “That wasn’t dropped, honey. It was thrown.”

Within the Irvas’ rooms something wooden overturned, and it seemed a barrel was being rocked. “What do you suppose is wrong?” Rosalind had no book in her hand; evidently she had just been sitting there on the edge of the easy chair, waiting for something to listen to. She minded New York less than George. He hadn’t noticed when she had come in from doing the dishes in the kitchenette. After supper every evening, he had his Arabic hour; during it he liked to be undisturbed. “Do you suppose something’s the matter?” Rosalind persisted, slightly rephrasing her question in case he had heard it the first time.

George lowered his book with ostensible patience. “Does Irva drink?”

“I don’t know. He’s a chef.”

“You think chefs don’t drink. Just eat.”

“I hadn’t meant the two to be connected.” Rosalind made the reply blandly, as if he had simply misunderstood.

George returned to his book. The imperfect with the perfect of another verb expresses the future perfect: “Zaid will have written.” (Another glass was smashed, this time in a subdued way. A human voice could be heard, though not understood.) When it is an independent verb, the subject is in the nominative and the complement in the accusative: “The apostle will be a witness against you.”

“Listen,” Rosalind said with the doomsday hiss of a wife who at night smells gas. He listened, hearing nothing. Then Mrs. Irva began to scream.

George immediately hoped that the woman was joking. The noises she made might have meant anything: fear, joy, anger, exuberance. They might have been produced mechanically, by the rhythmic friction of a huge and useful machine. It seemed likely that they would stop.

“What are you going to do?” Rosalind asked him. She had risen and was standing close to him, giving off an oppressive aroma of concern.

“Do?”

“Is there anyone we could get?”

Their janitor, a slender, blue-jawed Pole, was in charge of three other buildings and a grammar school, and made his visitations around dawn and midnight. Their landlady, a grim Jewish widow, lived across the Park, at a more acceptable address. Their only neighbor other than the Irvas was a young Chinese student in a room at the back of the building, behind the Chandlers’ bedroom; his examinations over, he had inked, in a beautiful black calligraphy, an Ohio forwarding address onto the wall above his mailbox, and left.

“No, Karl! Decency!” Mrs. Irva shouted. Her voice, mingled with confused tumbling effects, had lost its early brilliance. Now hoarse, now shrill, her mouthings were frantic. “No, no, no, no, please God no!”

“He’s killing her, George. George, what are you doing?”

“Doing?”

“Must I call the police?” She glared at him with an icy contempt that her good nature melted in seconds. She went to the wall and leaned against it gracefully, her mouth wide open. “They’re turning on the faucet,” she whispered.

George asked, “You think we should interfere?”

“Wait. They’re so quiet now.”

“They—”

“Sh-h-h!”

George said, “She’s dead, honey. He’s washing the blood off his hands.” Even in these taut circumstances, he could not resist kidding her. In her excitement she fell right in with it.

“He has, hasn’t he?” she agreed. Then, seeing his smile, she said, “You don’t think he has.”

He squeezed her soft forearm kindly.

“George, he really has killed her,” Rosalind said. “That’s why there’s no noise. Break in!”

“Stop and think, honey. How do you know they’re not—?”

Her eyes widened as the thought dawned on her. “Are there really people like that?” She was confused; the room beyond the wall was silent; it seemed to George that he had brought the incident to a conclusion.

“Help, please help,” Mrs. Irva called, rather calmly. Evidently this enraged her attacker, for in a moment she screamed with an intensity that choked her, as a baby at the height of a tantrum will nearly strangle. The noise, so irrational, such a poor reward for his patience, infuriated George; maddened into bravery, he opened his door and stepped out on the square of uncarpeted boards that served as an entrance hall to the three apartments. Standing there in its center, he seemed to see himself across a great span of time, as if he were an old man recalling a youthful exploit, recounting his finest hour. Fearless and lucid, he rapped his knuckles below the tacked card: Mr. and Mrs. Karl Irva. He sang out, “Everybody all right in there?”

“Be careful,” Rosalind pleaded, at the same time resting her hands on his back, threatening a shove forward. He turned to rebuke her and was offended to discover that, because of his crouching and her tiptoeing, her eyes were much higher than his.

“Do you want to run in yourself?” he snapped and, without thinking, turned the knob of the Irvas’ door. It had not been locked.

He swung the door in timidly, gaining an upright slice of an American interior: dimly figured carpet, a slice of easy chair, a straw wastebasket beneath a television set seen sidewise, a bamboo lamp, a propped-up photograph, ochre wall, bad green ceiling. Nothing reflected disturbance. From the large unseen portion of the room, Mrs. Irva called, “Go away—he has a knife!” At the sound of her voice George slammed the door shut instinctively, keeping his hand on the knob, as if the door were his shield.

“We must help her,” Rosalind insisted.

“Get off my back,” he said.

“Lord,” Mrs. Irva moaned. George pushed open the door again, far enough to see one trace of disorder—an undershirt on a sofa arm. “Stay out!” the unseen woman called. “Get some help!” Again George closed the door.

A voice unmistakably Mr. Irva’s asked without inflection, “Who have you fetched?” No answer was made. George was relieved. Though he had not seen Mrs. Irva, she might have supposed who he was. Footsteps unexpectedly thumped toward them, and the young couple fled to their own apartment, Rosalind skinning her husband’s arm as she shut and bolted their door.

Here George, in telling the story, would hold his elbow outward and with the stiffened fingers of his other hand indicate precisely how the metal edge of the lock projection caught the flat area on the side of his forearm and scraped the skin blue, right through his shirt—ripped the shirt, too. A four-dollar shirt. His emphasis on this detail was clearly for his wife’s benefit, but she failed to consider herself chided, and her wide triangular face expressed only a pretty anxiety to have the narrative continue. Rosalind, the daughter of a self-made Topeka contractor, was, unlike her husband, optimistic and un-self-conscious. Her gaps in judgment were startling. Over her tall and generous figure she wore noisy, big-patterned dresses. She mispronounced even simple names—Sart-er, Hāzlitt, Maughhum. In time, anticipating George’s embarrassed correction, she came to pause and smile considerately at company before blundering. “And what I liked best were some pink fish and stick figures by a wonderful painter called … Klēē?” Yet she remembered some things excellently: shops and streets, characters in novels she had enjoyed, infielders, minor movie actors. When George’s arm-scraping demonstration was completed, she would say, “One of the policemen who finally came looked just like John Ireland. Only younger, and not so nice.”

It had been Rosalind who had called them; George was in the bathroom dabbing boric acid on his wound. Following the instructions on page one of the telephone directory, she dialed zero and said, “I want a policeman.”

The operator, mistaking Rosalind for a teen-ager, asked, “You’re sure now, honey?” She was always being called “honey.”

“I really do.”

The two cops who came twelve minutes later were young, and plainly in process of being wised up. They stood frowning in the Chandlers’ doorway, shoulder to shoulder, just two decent ex-MPs trying to make an honest buck in a rotten world. First off, their eyes were very interested in the third finger of Rosalind’s left hand. As soon as the one that looked a little like John Ireland saw the glint of gold there, he turned his attention to George, but the other one kept at it, trying to get his eyes around the ring, under it, giving it the acid bath.

“We were given this apartment number,” John said. He looked at a slip of paper and read each figure separately, “Five, four, A.”

“That door there,” George said, unnecessarily pointing over the cop’s shoulder. He was frightened; his hand shook badly. The cops took this in. “We heard a glass break about two hours ago, around eight o’clock.”

“It’s nine-oh-five now,” the other cop said, looking at his wristwatch.

“It seems later,” Rosalind said. The eyes of both policemen focused on her lips. The suspicious one grimaced with the effort of letting nothing about her voice—Midwestern, less snappy than the voices of most tarts—escape him.

George took courage from his wife’s reminder that he had been given bad service. With new authority he described the sounds and screams they had heard. “There’s been some rumpus after we called you, but for the last six minutes or so there’s been no noise. We would have heard if there had been—these walls are so goddamn thin.” He smiled slightly, to go with the swearing, but it won him no friends.

The other cop wrote scrunchily in a little pad. “Six minutes or so,” he muttered. George had no idea why he had said six minutes instead of five. It did sound fishy. “Since you called us, you stayed in your room?”

“We didn’t want to enrage him,” George said.

John Ireland, his needle nose in the air, rapped delicately on the Irvas’ door. Getting no answer, he toed it open. They all followed him in. The room was empty. One chair was overturned. Flakes and shards of glass glittered on the carpet. The disorder in the room was less than it should have been; the Chandlers were disappointed and shamed.

Yet now, when they seemed to themselves most vulnerable, the policemen failed to bully them. John Ireland undid the little snap on his holster. The other one said, “Blood on the sofa arm.” Moving into the kitchenette, he said, in a murmur that carried, “Blood in the sink.”

Blood in the sink! “Her cries became more and more frantic,” George said.

John Ireland stuck his head out of a window.

The other cop asked, “Miss, is there a phone in here?”

“We never hear it ring,” Rosalind said.

“We have a phone in our apartment,” George told them. He was eager to succeed in his new role of cops’ ally. That they all faced a common enemy was clear now. Perhaps Irva was behind the shower curtain, or stood outside the window, on the tiny concrete balcony, advertised as “terrace,” which the Chandlers could see when they risked stepping out on their own. A sense of danger spread through the room like iodine in water. John Ireland moved quickly away from the window. The other cop came in from the kitchen. The three men gathered around the door, waiting, with a strained courtesy, for Rosalind to go first.

She stepped into the little hall and screamed; astounded, George leaped and embraced her from behind. The cops came after. On the first landing of the stairs going up to the next floor, at the level of their heads, Mrs. Irva crouched on all fours, staring at them, in her eyes an obscure and watery emotion. Her right forearm was solidly red with blood. How bright blood is! The right side of her slip was torn, exposing one breast. She said nothing.

What had happened, the Chandlers later decided, was that, after Mr. Irva left (they wondered in retrospect if a door hadn’t slammed), Mrs. Irva, afraid, had run up the stairs and then, feeling weak, or curious about the conversations downstairs, had begun to crawl down again. There was a lot this didn’t explain. Why should she have left the room after her husband had gone? On the other hand, if he had chased her up the stairs, why wasn’t he still up there with her? One cop had gone up and looked and found nothing. Perhaps Irva had been up there when the police arrived and had sneaked down when they were all in his apartment. He could even have taken the elevator down, though this seemed a cool thing to do. The elevator in the building was self-service, and if anybody on a lower floor had rung, the elevator, with the criminal in it, would have stopped to let him on. Yet weren’t the walls thin enough for them to have heard Mr. Irva’s footsteps?

Mrs. Irva shed no light. She looked so bloody and dazed no one pressed her for information. The cops led her into the Chandlers’ apartment and had her lie on the odorous sofa that had come with the place. John Ireland told Rosalind to bring two towels from the bathroom and asked George if there was any hard liquor around. When Rosalind brought the towels (guest towels, George saw), John tore one lengthwise to make a tourniquet. The Chandlers drank seldom, being both thrifty and health-minded, but they did have some sherry in the kitchen cabinet, behind a loaf of Pepperidge Farm bread. George poured some into a tumbler and handed it timidly to Mrs. Irva, by now rather dapper in her tourniquet. Her broken slip strap had been knotted. She politely took a sip and said “Fine,” though she drank no more. Rosalind brought in a yellow blanket from the bedroom. She spread it over Mrs. Irva, then went into the kitchen and began to heat water.

“What are you doing?” George asked her.

“He told me to make coffee,” she said, nodding toward the cop who did not look like any movie star.

The one who did came and stood by George; having this blue uniform brush against him made George feel arrested. “Takes all types,” he muttered uneasily.

“Buddy, this is nothing,” the policeman answered. “This is tame. Stuff worse than this happens every minute in this city.”

George began to like him. “I believe it,” he said. “Hell, I was in the subway two weeks ago and a young kid took a swing at me.”

John shook his head. “Buddy, that’s nothing compared to what I see every day. Every day of the week.”

The ambulance came before the coffee water boiled. Two Negroes were admitted. One was dressed in crisp white and carried a folded stretcher, which he unravelled with a conjurer’s zest. The other, taller, logier, and perhaps recently from the South, wore a maroon sports jacket over the thin coat of his uniform. They eased Mrs. Irva into the stretcher; she was passive, but her mouth worked with fright when she felt herself being lifted. “Eeasy theah,” the tall bearer said. The ambulance men had noticed on the way up that the elevator was too small for the stretcher; they had to walk down four flights, the front one holding the handles at shoulder height, both of them murmuring to their living burden.

The policemen lingered a moment in the elevator, facing the Chandlers, who hung together in the doorway like the host couple after a shindig. “O.K.,” John said threateningly. “We’ve got statements.” The elevator door sucked shut, and the cops dropped from view.

From their window George and Rosalind could see the pavement, dotted with foreshortened spectators. These human beings made an aisle down which the four public servants with their burden passed. Mrs. Irva, a yellow rectangle from five stories up, was inserted into the gray rectangle of the ambulance. The policemen got into their green-and-white-and-black Ford, and the two vehicles pulled away from the curb precisely together, like nightclub dancers. The ambulance moaned irritably and didn’t begin to wail until it was down the block, out of sight.

George tried to return to his Arabic, but his wife was too excited, and they stayed awake until one o’clock, twisting and talking in bed. For the sixth time Rosalind regretted that she had not seen the one policeman tie Mrs. Irva’s slip strap. Again George objected that most likely she tied it herself.

“With her arm cut to the bone?”

“It wasn’t cut to the bone, honey. It was just a nick.”

She pounded her pillow and dropped her head into it. “I know he did it. That would have been just like him. The one with the blunt nose was much sweeter.”

“After the way he looked at you at the door? Didn’t you see him look at your wedding ring?”

“At least he paid some attention to me. The other one was in love with you.” Rosalind saw homosexuals everywhere.

Next morning, they could hear Mrs. Irva in her apartment, vacuuming. Several days later, George went down in the elevator with her. He asked her how she was feeling. No bandage showed; she was wearing long sleeves.

She beamed. “Very decent. And how’s yourself and your lovely wife?”

“All right,” George said, nettled to have his question taken as a pleasantry. He prodded her with “You got home all right?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “They were such nice men.”

George didn’t understand. The policemen? The doctors at the hospital? The fourth, the third, the second floors passed them in silence.

“My husband—” Mrs. Irva began. They had reached the ground floor; the door drew open.

“What about your husband?”

“Yes, he doesn’t blame you and your wife in the slightest,” she said, and then smiled as if she had just uttered a gracious invitation. And she hadn’t even mentioned his blanket.

George missed that yellow blanket. For him, May nights in New York were chilly. He was here looking for a job that would take him to Arabia or some other Moslem place. The quest led him into the sinister, lavishly carpeted Embassies of Middle Eastern principalities, and into the sour waiting rooms of oil companies, export outfits, shippers, banks with overseas branches. Receptionists were impolite. Personnel men, pressing their fingertips together, pondered. George puzzled them. There was no space on their forms where Arabophilia could be entered.

It was hard to coördinate this passion for the desert with George’s plump, stodgy face and wary personality. He seldom explained. But late in an evening spent with friends he might blurt out a description of how the Danakil fish for trocas in the Red Sea. “It’s fantastic. They walk around on these reefs and dip their whole bodies underwater whenever they see one of these big snails. Then the wind coming down from Egypt dries them so their entire bodies are white with salt. The stuff they’re walking on is brittle, and when it breaks through it scrapes the skin off their legs. Then poisonous jellyfish sting them, so as they move along they sing at the top of their lungs to scare them away. You can smell one of these fishing boats six miles away on account of the rotting snails in the hold. At night, they sleep on these little boats with millions of black flies getting into their food. Fifty miles away is the Arabian coast with nothing on it but pirates. And here are these guys singing to keep the poisonous jellyfish away. You wonder— I know what you’re thinking.” Nobody knew what George was thinking, but an expression on one of the faces turned toward him would make him think he was making a fool of himself.

He might, at another time, lambaste modern housing—the outskirts of Topeka covered with ugly pastel boxes arranged on phony curving streets; the supermarkets, the widening highways, the land going under all over. This was more like George: he advanced his intellect negatively, by extending his contempt. All movies were lousy, all politicians were crooked, public education in America was the world’s worst, most novels were a waste of time, everybody on television was out for your money. George was proud of these perceptions; he had not discovered that at the “good” colleges (he was eager to admit that his own college had been no good) one liked everything—Western movies, corny music, trashy books, crooked politicos—and reserved distaste for great men.

A friend looking through the Chandlers’ library (mostly old political-science textbooks, and paperback mysteries, which Rosalind chain-read) might pull down, because it alone suggested Arabia, Hashish, by Henri de Monfreid, and find underlined—the underlining, thick soft pencil, was unmistakably George—the sentence The heat of the day breathed out from the walls and ground like an immense sigh of relief. But, facing a preoccupied executive across a glass-topped desk, George could only say, with a compromising snicker, “I guess it is silly, but ever since I was a kid I’ve been fascinated by those places.”

“No, I don’t think it’s silly,” would be the answer.

A month after the Irvas’ fight, Rosalind stood outside their door and greeted George at his homecoming with, “The most wonderful thing has happened!”

“I bet.” He was coming up the stairs; a woman who lived on the third floor had stepped into the elevator with him, and since the machine tended to return to the ground floor after one stop, he had got out with her and walked up two flights. His day had been frustrating. The most promising possibility, working with the United States delegation to a trade fair in Basra, appeared to have fallen through. It had taken him three-quarters of an hour to see Mr. Guerin again, and then he was told nothing but that funds were limited. He was so depressed that he had gone into a thirty-eight-cent movie, but it was something old with Barbara Stanwyck and so bad he had to leave, feeling sick. In a luncheonette on East Thirty-third Street he was charged $1.10 for a turkey sandwich, a glass of milk, and a cup of coffee. When he gave the cashier a five-dollar bill, she insisted that he also produce a dime and three pennies for tax, and then dealt the four dollars change not into his waiting hand but, rudely, onto the counter. As if he were covered with germs. On his way home, the mobs choking the subways, clustering at intersections, dodging, shoving, avoiding eye contact, seemed one huge contamination. It was his eleventh week of hunting. Rosalind’s department-store job, which was for only six hours a day now that the Easter rush had subsided, did not quite take care of rent and food. The Chandlers were eating into their savings at the rate of fifty dollars a month.

Rosalind stood between him and their door. This annoyed George; he was tired. “Wait,” Rosalind said. Holding up a palm, she prolonged her own delight. “Have you seen either of the Irvas lately? Think.”

“I never see him. Once in a while Mrs. and I get caught in the elevator together.” After his first conversation, he had not tried to sound Mrs. Irva out on the incident, and there seemed to be so little connection between the crazed and half-naked sufferer of that night and this compact little woman, with her hair going white in stripes and black buttons down the front of her blouse and an orange mouth painted up over the natural edge of her upper lip, that it was easy for George to discuss with her the weather and the poor way the building was run, as if they had nothing more important between them.

“What is this routine?” George asked after Rosalind had stood silent for a moment, on her face a great, loving smile.

“Behold, effendi,” she said, opening the door.

Inside the room George saw flowers everywhere, white, pink, yellow, tall flowers, motionless, in vases, pitchers, and wastebaskets, lying in bundles on tables and chairs and on the floor. George never knew the names of flowers, but these were a public sort, big and hardy. Benevolence breathed from their long, ignorant, complex faces. The air in the room had a flower-shop coolness.

“They came in a station wagon. Mrs. Irva said they were used to decorate a banquet last night, and the man in charge said the chef should have them. Mr. Irva thought it would be nice to give them to us. To show that everything was right between our families, Mrs. Irva said.”

George was puzzled, stopped. His mind, swept clean of assertion, knew nothing but the flowers; they poured through his eyes. Later, in the stink and strangeness of Basra, whenever the homesick couple tried to recall America, the image that first and most vividly came to George was that of those massed idiot beauties.