# A Trillion Feet of Gas

# John Updike

OLD MAN FRAELICH, as soon as they entered his room, rose in his pearl-pale suit and intoned flatulently, “John, let’s you and I go downstairs.”

Another man, in black, got to his feet.

“That would be rude,” Mrs. Fraelich stated, more as a simple fact than as a reprimand, though it might have been her influence—it was hard to guess how much power she had over her husband—that induced Fraelich to shake hands with his three young guests, listening to their names and gazing above their heads while his puffy, beringed hand, apparently cut off from his brain and acting on its own decent instincts, floated forward from his vest. Under those averted eyes Luke felt like a rich pastry mistakenly offered to an ill man. Had Fraelich forgotten the several times they had met before?

Kathy, introducing her guests to her father-in-law with the angular exaggerations of a girl whose beauty is her sole defense, also implied they were strangers. “Father, this is Elizabeth Forrest, and Luther Forrest.”

“You remember Luke from school,” Tim told him.

“Of course I have,” Fraelich said evenly, changing his son’s verb and tilting back his head, as if into a pillow, so that he looked sicker than ever; his complexion had the sheen of a skin sweating out a fever. Luke suddenly got the idea that Liz’s being pregnant had offended him.

“And Mr. Boyce-King from England,” Kathy continued.

“Just King,” Donald corrected, blushing quickly. “Don King. Bryce is the middle name.”

“Not a hyphen!” Kathy cried, insisting, in the midst of her in-laws and her husband’s friends, on her right to be natural and gay. Fatigue added to her lean charm all the romantic suggestions of exhaustion. Luke had been told she was undergoing analysis. “Pardon me. I only heard your name once over the phone.”

“It’s awfully good of you to have me,” Donald said mechanically.

“He looks like a hyphen person, doesn’t he?” Liz said, helping the other girl out, and unwittingly reflecting the ironic discussions she and Luke had had about their English guest in the few hours since Monday when Donald had not been with them. “I think it’s his eyebrows.”

In the background Mrs. Fraelich had got to her feet, swinging her arms in boredom or exasperation. As she did so, the décolletage of her dress—a tube of soft blue cloth with big holes cut for the throat and arms, as in old copies of Vanity Fair—wandered alarmingly over her gaunt, freckled chest. She offered her second fact to the group. “Here is Mr. Born.”

For the first time Fraelich showed animation. “Yes,” he announced, and his voice ballooned, “we can’t forget John Born.” The man in black, stout but solid, gave each of the young people a firm handshake and a grunt of pleasure. His suit and mustache were identically dark. Luke was delighted that Donald was meeting, even wordlessly, an authentic specimen of the Manhattan rich. Fraelich was rich but scarcely authentic.

The old people scattered to other quarters of the duplex, and the young people were left alone with the bulwark-style leather furniture, Mrs. Fraelich’s Japanese watercolors, and the parabolic sub-ceiling suspended and glowing à la restaurant.

“Please forgive the hyphen; it’s a fantasy of mine that all Englishmen have double names,” Kathy said to Donald, who, with the abrupt ease of the British, was examining, his head atilt, the spines of the books on the shelves.

“Not at all. I enjoyed it.”

The smug inappropriateness of the remark tipped them into a difficult silence. An awkward evening seemed foreshadowed. Most of the strands of acquaintance between the five were tenuous. Luke had known Tim at college, and had met Donald in England, and the two wives were, considering the slightness of their acquaintance, fond of each other. They made the best of it, chatting and sipping alcoholic drinks just like grownups. Luke kept wanting to suggest that they play Monopoly. Fraelich must have a set, and it would be a good American game for Donald to learn. Dinner evidently would be quite late. A new factor, hunger, was added to the nervous unrest in Luke’s stomach.

He talked to Tim of common friends. Neither had heard anything from Irv. Preston Wentworth, Tim thought, was on the West Coast. Leo Bailley had been in town. It was strange how completely you could lose sight of men you saw every day in college. Our generation just doesn’t write letters, Luke offered.

Donald said he thought that Americans phoned everywhere, or had little boys in wingèd boots carrying singing messages.

Kathy asked Liz how she felt. Liz said that she felt just the same, but clumsier; that it was surprising how much you felt like your old self; and that she was looking forward to the contented-cow stage mentioned in the motherhood books. Donald laughed at “motherhood books.” Luke saw Kathy send Liz, by wingèd facial expression, a message that probably read, “We’re thinking about babies, too, but Timothy …” “How nice or sad,” Liz’s face sent back. Donald, trapped near the intersection of these baby-looks, experienced another flash of discomfiture and blushed stuffily. He had the oval slant eyes and full-fleshed lips of the British intellectual, and the raw sloping forehead.

Tim Fraelich, sensing that his three guests had been together so much that in relation to each other they were speechless, assumed the role of topic starter. He mentioned the Olympic Games. Luke joined in gratefully. Since his interceding with, “You remember Luke from school,” Luke loved Tim, his slow considerate mind and his ugly laborer’s face. The blessing of money, in combination with modest endowments otherwise, had made Tim very gentle. In the Areté Club—he had been president when Luke was a sophomore—he had hated that anyone must be blackballed, whereas Luke, who knew that his own election had been close, proudly and recklessly wielded the veto.

The Olympic discussion died soon. Luke couldn’t think of any stars except Parry O’Brien, and the vaulting preacher Richards, and the young Negro—what was his name?—who jumped seven feet.

Swift and strong Americans, Donald said, appeared on the scene like waves of industrial produce.

But it was the Commonwealth, they hastened to assure him, that demolished the four-minute mile. The Forrests, their year in Oxford, had lived a block away from the Iffley track, where Bannister had run the first one. Donald had been at Oxford at the time but naturally hadn’t bothered to attend the meet. He seemed to feel a certain distinction lay in this.

Tim asked his English guest what he had seen of New York so far—if he had seen such-and-such an interesting place. Lamentably, nothing Tim named had Donald seen. The Forrests had been poor guides, though they had worked hard. Preceded by a radiogram, Donald had arrived on a Dutch liner, penniless and in the show-me mood of a cultural delegation. With the politico-literary precocity of Oxford youth, he had already been published in one of the British liberal weeklies, and he seemed to imagine that visiting the transatlantic land mass would constitute a scoop, Mrs. Trollope alone preceding him. Cruelly harried by their sense of official responsibility, the Forrests, after displaying to him their own selves—typical of the rising generation, he with a job in media and she with Scandinavian tastes, favoring natural wood and natural childbirth—had arranged parties and suppers where the allegorical figures of Graduate Student, Unwed Secretary, Struggling Abstract Painter, Intellectual Catholic, Jewish Would-Be Actress, and Fledgling Corporation Lawyer filed across the stage of their visitor’s preconceptions. Luke described in sociological detail his childhood in a small Ohio town, and Liz contributed what she knew of the caste system in Massachusetts. Donald, though polite, was rarely moved. Luke and Liz whispered guiltily in bed at night if, when the guests were gone, Donald did not withdraw his notebook from his coat pocket and take it to the sofa with a pencil and his final drink of the day. He drank steadily and soberly. In the daytime, Liz, saying that pregnant women should walk lots anyway, took Donald hunting for useful sights. She led him through Chinatown, the Village, Wall Street, the Lower East Side, and at Luke’s evening homecoming complained, as Donald sat sipping joylessly, his silence lending assent, that everything is just buildings and cars, that she felt so sorry for Donald, being stuck with them.

Their guest claimed he did plan to leave. He wanted to see the “Southland,” and especially “your plains.” But no trip could begin until a money order arrived from somewhere—Canada, they thought he said. The Forrests had nicknamed it “the packet from France.” In the close company the three kept, the joke had come into the open. For several breakfasts, Luke had asked, “The packet from France arrive?” Liz, noting Donald’s diminishing response, warned her husband that he gave the impression of hinting. Luke said it wasn’t a hint, it was a pleasantry, and anyway, it didn’t look to him as if Donald was very sensitive to hints or indeed to anything.

It was true, the Englishman’s calm—so cheering in Oxford, so strong that, even meeting him on High Street, against a background of steelworkers on bicycles and whey-faced bus queues, you smelled pipe smoke, and felt the safety of his room in Magdalen, with the old novels in many thin volumes and the window giving onto the deer park and the drab London magazines stacked like dolls’ newspapers on the mantel—in America had become a maddening quiescence, as if the thicker sunlight of this more southern country were a physical weight on his limbs. He had protested the bother of being included in this dinner engagement, but he had not suggested, as they had hoped, that he could manage a night on his own.

“No,” he was saying to Tim, “they haven’t taken me to Louie’s. You say it’s an interesting place. Does it have lots of ethos? You Americans are always talking about ethos. Margaret Mead is something of your White Goddess over here, isn’t she?”

“Mamie is,” Kathy suddenly said, thrusting her fingers into the hair at her temples and laughing when the others did.

Donald said that once again the American people had proven themselves idiots in the eyes of the world. Luke said it would be a different story in 1960. “Wait till ’sixty, wait till ’sixty,” Donald said. “That’s all you people think about. The 1960 model of Plymouth car; the population in 1960. You’re in love with the future.” He touched, in an unconscious gesture, the breast of his coat, to make sure the stiffness of the notebook was there. Luke smiled and saw them all through Donald’s eyes: the mild, homely heir; his fretful, leggy wife; Liz with her half-formed baby; Luke himself with his half-baked success—pale, pale. Poor Americans, these, for the New Statesman & Nation. What Donald couldn’t see that Luke could was how well he, Donald, his sensible English shoes cracked and his wool clothes frazzled, blended into their pastel frieze.

The man introduced to them as Mr. Born walked into the room. “Looks like Ah’ll be getting a ride,” he said to Tim. “With your pa and ma.” His voice, as Luke had expected, was rich and grainy, but the accent forced a slight revision of his first idea of the man. He was not a New Yorker. In the black suit, Born’s body, solid as a barrel, stood out with peculiar force against the linen-covered wall, where Mrs. Fraelich’s Japanese prints made patches of vague color.

“Would you like a Scotch-and-water, John?” Tim asked. “Or cognac?” Mr. Born shook his massive head—severed from his body, it might have weighed forty pounds—and held up his square, exquisitely clean hand to halt all liquor traffic. In the other he gripped a heavy cigar, freshly lighted.

“We’ve been chewing over the election,” Tim said.

“You desahd who won it?”

The young people made a fragile noise of laughter.

“We’ve been deciding who should have won it,” Donald said, cross spots appearing on his cheekbones and forehead.

“Yeass,” Mr. Born said, simultaneous with the hissing of the cushions as he settled into a leather armchair. “There was never any doubt about the way it would go in Texas. The betting in Houston wasn’t on who”—his lips pushed forward on the prolonged “who”—“would get it but at what taam the other fella would concede.” He rotated the cigar a half-circle, so the burning end was toward himself. “A lotta money was lost in Houston while Adlai was making that speech so good. They thought, you see, it would be sooner.”

“How did you do?” Donald asked tactlessly, as if this were an exhibit they had arranged for him.

“Noo.” The Texan scratched his ear fastidiously and beamed. “I had no money on it.”

“What is the situation out there? Politically? One reads the Democrats are in bad shape,” Donald said.

The broad healthy face bunched as he pleasantly studied the boy. “What they say, Lyndon didn’t show up too good at the convention. We aren’t all that proud of him. As I heard it expressed, the feeling was, Let those two run and get killed and get rid of ’em that way. That’s the way I’ve heard it expressed: Run those two, and let ’em get killed.”

“Really!” Kathy exclaimed. Then, surprised at herself, she bit her lower lip coquettishly and crossed her legs, calling attention to them. Luke liked her legs because above the lean and urban ankles the calves swelled to a country plumpness.

“The American scramble,” Donald murmured.

Luke, afraid Mr. Born would feel hostility in the air, asked why the South hadn’t pushed someone like Gore instead of Kennedy.

“Gore’s not popular. The answer’s very simple: The South doesn’t have anyone big enough. ’Cept Lyndon. And he’s sick. Heart attack. No, they’re in a bad way down there. They got the leaders of both houses, and they’re in a bad way.”

“Wouldn’t there be a certain amount of anti-Catholic sentiment stirred up if Kennedy were to run?” Tim asked. His mother, for a period in her youth, had been a convert to the Church.

Mr. Born puffed his cigar and squinted at his friend’s son through the smoke. “I think we’ve outgrown that. I think we’ve outgrown that.”

The rough bulge of Donald’s forehead burned with political antagonism. He blurted, “You’re pleased with the way things went?”

“Well. I voted for Aahk. Not particularly proud of it, though. Not particularly proud of it. He vetoed our gas bill.” Everyone laughed, for no clear reason. “If he had it to do over again, he wouldn’t do it.”

“You think so?” Donald asked.

“I know it for a faact. He’s said so. He wants the bill. And Adlai, he wouldn’t promise if he got in he wouldn’t try to get the Lands back to Washington. So we voted Aahk in; he was the best we could get.”

Donald pointed at him gingerly. “You, of course, don’t want the Tidelands to revert to the federal government.”

“They cain’t. There won’t be any gas. It’s off twelve percent from last year now, for the needs. You see— Are you all interested in this?”

The group nodded hastily.

“I have a trillion feet of gas. It’s down there. In the ground. It’s not gone to go away. Now, I made a contract to sell that gas at eighteen cents in Chicago. In the city of Chicago there are maybe twelve thousand meters now that don’t have adequate supply. I wanted to pipe it up, from Texas. That was two years ago. They won’t let me do it. I’ve been in Washington, D.C., for most of those two years, trying to see a bill passed that’ll let me do it.” He released some smoke and smiled. Washington, the implication was, had agreed with him.

Donald asked why they wouldn’t let him do it. Mr. Born explained in detail—clearly and kindly, and even got to his feet to explain—federal agencies, state commissions, wellhead quotas, costs of distillate, dry holes (“They don’t allow you for drah holes after; the ones up to, O.K., but then they don’t recognize ’em”), and the Socialist color of thinking in Washington. On and on it went, a beautiful composition, vowel upon vowel, occasional emphasis striking like an oboe into a passage of cellos. The coda came too soon: “But the point, the point is this: If they do pass it, then fine. I’m contracted out; I’m willing to stick by it. But if they don’t—if they don’t, then I sell it for more insaahd Texas. That’s how demand is gone up.”

Luke realized with delight that here, not ten feet away, walked and talked a bugaboo—a Tidelands lobbyist, a States’ Righter, a Purchaser of Congressmen, a Pillar of Reaction. And what had he proved to be, this stout man holding his huge head forward from his spine, bisonlike? A companion all simplicity and courtesy, bearing without complaint—and all for the sake, it seemed, of these young people—the unthinkable burden of a trillion feet of gas. Luke could not remember the reasons for governmental control of big business any better than he could recall when drunk the defects of his own personality. With a gentle three-finger grip on his cigar, Mr. Born settled back into the armchair, the viewpoints alternative to his hanging vaporized in the air around him, a flattering haze.

The next minute, Mr. and Mrs. Fraelich came and took John Born away, though not before old man Fraelich, his bulbous gray voice droning anxiously, exuded every fact he knew about the natural-gas industry. Mr. Born listened politely, tilting his stogie this way and that. The possibility occurred to Luke that, as Mr. Born owned a trillion feet of gas, Mr. Fraelich owned John Born.

“He’s really a hell of a nice guy,” Tim said when the older people had gone.

“Oh, he was wonderful!” Liz said. “The way he stood there, so big in his black suit—” She encircled an area with her arms and, without thinking, thrust out her stomach.

Kathy asked, “Did he mean a trillion feet of gas in the pipe?”

“No, no, you fluff,” Tim said, giving her a bullying hug that jarred Luke. “Cubic feet.”

“That still doesn’t mean anything to me,” Liz said. “Can’t you compress gas?”

“Where does he keep it?” Kathy asked. “I mean have it.”

“In the ground,” Luke said. “Weren’t you listening?” But she wasn’t his to scold.

Kathy kept at it. “Gas like you burn?”

“A trillion,” Donald said, tentatively sarcastic. “I don’t even know how many ciphers are in it.”

“Twelve in America,” Luke told him. “In Britain, more. Eighteen.”

“You Americans are so good at figgers. Yankee ingenuity.”

“Watch it, Boyce-King. If you British don’t learn how to say ‘figures’ we’ll pipe that gas under your island and float it off into space.”

Though no one else laughed, Luke himself did, at the picture of England as a red pieplate skimming through space, fragments chipping off until nothing remained but the dome of St. Paul’s. And after they had sat down to dinner, he continued, he felt, to be quite funny, frequently at the expense of “Boyce-King.” He felt back in college, full of novel education and undulled ambition. Kathy Fraelich laughed until her hand shook over the soup. It was good to know he could still, impending fatherhood or not, make people laugh. “… but the great movies are the ones where an idol teeters, you know, all grinning and bug-eyed”—he wobbled rigidly in his chair and then with horrible slow menace fell forward, breaking off the act just as his nose touched the rim of the water glass—“and then crumbles all over the screaming worshippers. They don’t make scenes like that in British movies. They save their idols and pawn them off as Druid shrines. Or else scratch ‘Wellington’ across the front. Ah, you’re a canny race, Boyce-King.”

After dinner they watched two television plays, which Luke ingeniously defended as fine art at every turn of the action, Donald squirming and blinking and the others not even listening but attending to the screen. Liz in her passive pregnant state didn’t resist TV. The young Fraelichs nuzzled together in one fat chair. The black-and-white figures—Luke kept saying “figgers”—were outlined on Fraelich’s costly color set with rainbows.

Luke, at the door, thanked their hosts enthusiastically for the excellent meal, the educational company, the iridescent dramas. The two couples expanded the last goodbye with a discussion of where to live eventually. They decided, while Donald nodded and chuckled uneasily on the fringe of the exchange, that nothing was as important as the children’s feeling secure in a place.

In the taxi, Luke, sorry that in the end Donald had seemed an extra party, said to him, “Well, we’ve shown you the Texas Billionaire. You’ve gazed into the heart of a great nation.”

“Did you notice his hands?” Liz asked. “They were really beautiful.” She was in a nice, tranquil mood, bathed in maternal hormones.

“It was extraordinary,” Donald said, squeezed in the middle and uncertain where his arms should go, “the way he held you all, with his consistently selfish reasoning.”

Luke put his arm on the back of the seat, including his visitor in a non-tactile embrace and touching Liz’s neck with his fingers. The packet from France, he reckoned, was on the way. The head of the cabby jerked as he tried to make out his passengers in the rearview mirror. “You’re afraid,” Luke said loudly, so the cabbie, democratically, could hear, “of our hideous vigor.”