# Incest

# John Updike

“I WAS IN A MOVIE HOUSE, fairly plush, in a sort of mezzanine, or balcony. It was a wide screen. On it there were tall people—it seemed to be at a dance or at least function—talking and bending toward each other gracefully, in that misty Technicolor Japanese pictures have. I knew that this was the movie version of Remembrance of Things Past. I had the impression sitting there that I had been looking forward to it for a long time, and I felt slightly guilty at not being home, you know. There was a girl sitting down one row, catty-corner from me. She had a small head with a thin, rather touching neck, like Moira Bryer, but it wasn’t her, or anyone we know. At any rate there was this feeling of great affection toward her, and it seemed, in the light of the movie—the movie was taking place entirely in a bright-yellow ballroom, so the faces of the audience were clear—it seemed somehow that the entire chance to make my life good was wrapped up in this girl, who was strange to me. Then she was in the seat beside me, and I was giving her a back rub.”

“Uh-oh,” his wife said, pausing in her stooping. She was grazing the carpet, picking up the toys, cards, matches, and spoons scattered by their daughter, Jane, a year and seven months old. Big Jane, as she had dreaded being called when they named the child, held quite still to catch what next he had to tell. Lee had begun the account ironically, to register his irritation with her for asking him, her own day had been so dull and wearing, to talk, to tell her of his day. Nothing interested him less than his own work day, done. It made his jaws ache, as with a smothered yawn, to consider framing one sentence about it. So, part desperation, part admonishment, he had begun to describe the dream he had been careful to keep from her at breakfast. He protected his wife here, at the place where he recalled feeling his hands leave the lean girl’s comforted shoulder blades and travel thoughtfully around the cool, strait, faintly ridged sides of the rib case to the always surprising boon in front—sensations momentarily more vivid in the nerves of his fingers than the immediate texture of the bamboo chair he occupied.

“Through the blouse.”

“Good,” she said. “Good for you both.”

Jane appeared so saucy saying this he was emboldened to add a true detail: “I think I did undo her bra strap. By pinching through the cloth.” To judge by his wife’s expression—tense for him, as if he were bragging before company—the addition was a mistake. He hastened on. “Then we were standing in back of the seats, behind one of those walls that come up to your chest, and I was being introduced to her father. I had the impression he was a doctor. He was rather pleasant, really: gray hair, and a firm grip. He seemed cordial, and I had a competent feeling, as if I couldn’t help making a good impression. But behind this encounter—with the girl standing off to one side—there was the sadness of the movie itself continuing on the screen; the music soared; Proust’s face was shown—a very young face—with the eyelids closed, and this shimmered and spun and turned into a slow pink vortex that then solidified into a huge motionless rose, filling the whole screen. And I thought, Now I know how the book ends.”

“How exciting, sweetie! It’s like ‘The Dream of the Rood.’ ” Jane resumed cleaning up after her daughter. Lee was abruptly oppressed by a belief that he had made her life harder to bear.

He said, “The girl must have been you, because you’re the only person I know who likes to have their back rubbed.”

“You find my neck touching?”

“Well, for God’s sake, I can’t be held accountable for the people I meet in dreams. I don’t invite them.” He was safe, of course, as long as they stayed away from the real issue, which was why he had told her the dream at all. “That girl means nothing to me now. In the dream obviously I was still in high school and hadn’t met you. I remember sitting there and wondering, because it was such a long movie, if my mother would give me hell when I got back.”

“I say, it’s a very exciting dream. How far are you in Proust?”

“Sodom and Gomorrah.” It occurred to him, what a queer mediocre thing it was, to scorn the English title yet not dare pronunciation of the French, and apropos of this self-revelation he said, “I’ll never get out. I’m just the sort of person who begins Proust and can’t finish. Lowest of the low. Won’t even tell his wife what his day at work was like.” He changed his tone. “Which is better—to finish Remembrance of Things Past, or to never begin it?”

Unexpectedly, so profound was her fatigue, she did not recognize the question as a piece of sport rhetoric, and, after a moment’s thought, seriously answered, “To finish it.”

Then she turned, and her lovely pale face—in photographs like a white water-smoothed stone, so little did the indentations and markings of it have harshness—lengthened, and the space between her eyebrows creased vertically; into the kitchen she shouted, “Jane! What are you doing?”

While they had been talking, the child had been keeping herself quiet with the sugar bowl. It was a new trick of hers, to push a chair and climb up on it; in this way a new world, a fresh stratum of things, was made available to her curiosity. The sugar bowl, plump modern pewter, lived casually on the counter of a waist-high cabinet, near the wall. Little Jane had taken and inverted it and, with an eerie, repetitious, patient dabbling motion had reduced the one shining Alp to a system of low ranges. She paid no attention to her mother’s shout, but when her parents drew closer and sighed together, she quickly turned her face toward them as if for admiration, her chin and lips frosted. Her upper lip, when she smiled, curved like the handlebar of a bicycle. The sight of her little, perfect, blue, inturned teeth struck joy into Lee’s heart.

With an audience now, little Jane accelerated her work. Her right hand, unattended by her eyes, which remained with her parents, scrabbled in a panicky way among the white drifts and then, palm down, swept a quantity onto the floor, where it hit with a sound like one stroke of a drummer’s brush. On the spatter-pattern linoleum the grains of sugar were scarcely visible. The child looked down, wondering where they had gone.

“Damn you,” his wife said to Lee, “you never do a damn thing to help. Now, why can’t you play with her a minute? You’re her father. I’m not going to clean it up.” She walked out of the kitchen.

“I do play with her,” he said, helplessly amiable (he understood his wife so well, divined so exactly what confused pain the scattered sugar caused her, she whose mother was a fanatic housekeeper), although he recognized that in her distraught state his keeping cheerful figured as mockery of her, one more cross to carry toward the day’s end.

Lee asked his daughter, “Want to run around?”

Jane hunched her shoulders and threw back her head, her sugar-gritty teeth gleefully clenched. “Pay roun,” she said, wagging her hand on her wrist.

He made the circular motion she had intended, and said, “In a minute. Now we must help poor Mommy.” With two sheets of typing paper, using one as a brush and the other as a pan, he cleaned up what she had spilled on the counter, reaching around her, since she kept her position standing on the chair. Her breath floated randomly, like a butterfly, on his forearms as he swept. They had become two conspirators. He folded the pan into a chute and returned the sugar to the bowl. Then there was the sugar on the floor—when you moved your feet, atoms of it crackled. He stooped, the two pieces of paper in his hands, knowing they wouldn’t quite do.

Jane whimpered and recklessly jogged her body up and down on her legs, making the chair tip and slap the cabinet. “Jane,” he said.

“Pay roun,” the girl whined feebly, her strength sapped by frustration.

“What?” his wife answered from the living room in a voice as cross as his. She had fought giving the baby her name, but he had insisted; there was no other woman’s name he liked, he had said.

“Nothing, I was scolding the kid. She was going to throw herself off the chair. She wants to play Round.”

“Well, why don’t you? She’s had an awfully dismal day. I don’t think we make her happy enough.”

“O.K., damn it. I will.” He crumpled the sheets of paper and stuffed them into the wastepaper can, letting the collected sugar fly where it would.

Round was a simple game. Jane ran from the sofa in one room to the bed in the other, through the high white double doorway, with pilasters, that had persuaded them to take the small apartment. He chased her. When his hands nicked her bottom or touched her soft baby waist, she laughed wildly her double laugh, which originated deep in her lungs and ricocheted, shrill, off her palate. Lee’s problem was to avoid overtaking her, in the great length of his strides, and stepping on her. When she wobbled or slowed, he clapped twice or thrice, to give her the sense of his hands right behind her ears, like two nipping birds. If she toppled, he swiftly picked her up, tickling her briefly if she seemed stunned or indignant. When she reached the bed—two low couches, box springs on short legs, set side by side and made up as one—he leapfrogged over her and fell full-length on the mattresses. This, for him, was the strenuous part of the game. Jane, finding herself between her father’s ankles after the rush of his body above her head, laughed her loudest, pivoted, and ran the other way, flailing her arms, which she held so stiffly the elbows were indentations. At the sofa end of the track there could be no leapfrogging. Lee merely stopped and stood with his back toward her until the little girl calculated she dare make a break for it. Her irises swivelled in their blue whites; it was the first strategy of her life. The instant she decided to move, her bottled excitement burst forth; as she clumped precipitately toward the high white arch, laughter threatened to upend her world. The game lasted until the child’s bath. Big Jane, for the first time that day free of her daughter, was not hurrying toward this moment.

After four times back and forth, Lee was exhausted and damp. He flopped on the bed the fifth time and instead of rising rolled onto his back. This was ruining the crease in his suit pants. His daughter, having started off, felt his absence behind her and halted. Her mother was coming from the kitchen, carrying washed diapers and a dust brush. Like her own mother, big Jane held a cigarette in the left corner of her mouth. Her left eye fluttered against the smoke. Lee’s mother-in-law was shorter than his wife, paler, more sarcastic—very different, he had thought. But this habit was hers right down to the tilt of the cigarette and the droop of the neglected ash. Looking, Lee saw that, as Jane squinted, the white skin at the outside corner of her eye crinkled finely, as dry as her mother’s, and that his wife’s lids were touched with the lashless, grainy, desexed quality of the lids of the middle-aged woman he had met not a dozen times, mostly in Indianapolis, where she kept a huge brick house spotlessly clean and sipped vermouth from breakfast to bed. All unknowing he had married her.

Jane, as she passed him, glanced down with an untypical, sardonic, cigarette-stitched expression. By shifting his head on the pillow he could watch her in the bathroom. She turned her back to hang the diapers on a brown cord strung between mirror and window. This was more his Jane: the wide rounded shoulders, the back like two halves of a peach, the big thighs, the narrow ankles. In the mirror her face, straining up as she attached the clothespins, showed age and pallor. It was as if there could exist a coin one side of which wears thin while the other keeps all the gloss and contour of the minting.

“Da-tee.” A coral flush had overspread his daughter’s face; in another moment she would whimper and throw herself on the floor.

With an ostentatious groan—he didn’t know which of his females he was rebuking—Lee rose from the bed and chased his daughter again. Then they played in the living room with the bolsters, two prism-shaped pieces of foam rubber that served as a back to the sofa, an uncomfortable modernist slab that could, when a relative visited, be used for sleeping. Stood on end, the stiff bolsters were about the toddler’s height, and little Jane hugged them like brothers, and preferred them to dolls. Though her size, they were light enough for her to lift and manipulate. Especially she loved to unzip the skin of gray fabric and prod with her finger the colorless, buoyant flesh beneath.

Catching them at this, big Jane said, “It kills me, it just is more depressing than anything she does, the way she’s always trying to undress those bolsters. Don’t encourage her at it.”

“I don’t. It’s not my idea. It was you who took the covers to the Launderette so she saw the bolsters naked. It made a big impression. It’s a state of primal innocence she wants to get them back to.”

Wavering between quarrel and honest discussion—that there was a way of “talking things out” was an idea she had inherited from her father, a rigorously liberal civic leader and committeeman—she chose discussion. “It’s not just those bolsters, you know. About three times a day she takes all the books out of their jackets. And spills matches in a little heap. You have no idea how much cleaning up I have to do to keep this place from looking like a pigpen. Yesterday I was in the bathroom washing my hair and when I came out she had gotten our camera open. I guess the whole roll’s exposed. I put it back. Today she wanted to get the works out of the music box and threw a tantrum. And I don’t know how often she brings those nasty frustrating little Chinese eggs you got her to me and says, ‘Opo. Opo.’ ”

Reminded of the word, little Jane said, of a bolster, “Opo, opo.” The zipper was stuck.

“Japanese,” Lee said. “Those eggs were made in Genuine Occupied Japan. They’re antiques.” The child’s being balked by the zipper preyed on his nerves. He hated fiddling with things like zippers caught on tiny strips of cloth; it was like squinting into a narrow detail of Hell. Further, as he leaned back on the bolsterless sofa to rest his neck against the wall, he infuriatingly felt the glass-capped legs skid on the uneven floor. “It’s a very healthy instinct,” he went on. “She’s an empiricist. She’s throwing open doors long locked by superstition.”

Jane said, “I looked up ‘unwrapping instinct’ in Spock and the only thing in the index was ‘underweight.’ ” Her tone was listless and humorous, and for the moment this concession put the family, to Lee’s mind, as right as three Japanese eggs, each inside the other.

His wife gave his daughter her bath as day turned to evening. He had to go into the bathroom himself and while there studied the scene. The child’s silky body, where immersed, was of a graver tint than that of her skin smarting in air. Two new cakes of unwrapped soap drifted around her. When her mother put a washrag to her face, blinding and scratching her, her fingers turned pale green with the pressure of her grip on the edge of the tub. She didn’t cry, though. “She seems to like her bath better now,” he said.

“She loves it. From five on, until you come, she talks about it. Daddy. Bath. Omelet.”

“Omma net,” his daughter said, biting her lower lip in a smile for him.

It had become, in one of those delicate mutations of routine whereby Jane shifted duties to him, his job to feed the little girl. The child’s soft mouth had been burned and she was wary; the sample bites Lee took to show her that the food was safe robbed of sharpness his appetite for his own dinner. Foreknowledge of the emotion caused in his wife by the sight of half-clean plates and half-full cups led him to complete little Jane’s portion of tomato juice, omelet-with-toast, and, for dessert, applesauce. Handling the tiny cup and tiny knife and fork and spoon set his stomach slightly on edge. Though not fussy about food, he was disturbed by eating implements of improper weight or length. Jane, hidden in the kitchen, was unable to see or, if she had seen, to appreciate—for all their three years of marriage, she had a stunted awareness of his niceties—the discomfort he was giving himself. This annoyed him.

So he was unfortunately brusque with little Jane’s bottle. Ideally the bottle was the happiest part of the meal. Steaming and dewy, it soared, white angel, out of the trembling pan, via Mommy’s hands, with a kiss, into hers. She grabbed it, and Lee, his hand behind her head, steered her toward the bedroom and her crib.

“Nice maugham,” she said, conscientiously echoing the infinity of times they had told her that the bottle was nice and warm.

Having lifted her into the crib and seen her root the bottle in her mouth, he dropped the fuzzy pink blanket over her and left quickly, gently closing the doors and sealing her into the darkness that was to merge with sleep. It was no doubt this quickness that undid the process. Though the child was drugged with heated milk, she still noticed a slight.

He suspected this at the time. When, their own meal barely begun, the crib springs creaked unmistakably, he said, “Son of a bitch.” Stan Lomax, on their faint radio, was giving an account of Ted Williams’ latest verbal outrage; Lee was desperate to hear every word. Like many Americans, he was spiritually dependent on Ted Williams. He asked his wife, “God damn it, doesn’t that kid do anything in the day? Didn’t you take her to the park? Why isn’t she worn out?”

The one answer to this could be his own getting up, after a silence, and going in to wait out the baby’s insomnia. The hollow goodness of the act, like a coin given to a beggar with a scowl, infuriated his tongue: “I work like a fool all day and come home and run the kid up and down until my legs ache and I have a headache and then I can’t even eat my pork chop in peace.”

In the aquarium of the dark room the child’s face floated spectrally, and her eyes seemed discrete pools of the distant, shy power that had put them all there, and had made these walls, and the single tree outside, showing the first stages of leaf under the tawny night sky of New York. “Do you want to go on the big bed?”

“Big—bed!”

“O.K.”

“Ogay.”

Adjusting to the lack of light, he perceived that the bottle, nested in a crumpled sheet, was drained. Little Jane had been standing in her crib, one foot on the edge, as if in ballet school. For two weeks she had been gathering nerve for the time she would climb the crib’s wall and drop free outside. He lifted her out, breathing “Ooh, heavy,” and took her to the wide low bed made of two beds. She clung to the fuzzy blanket—with milk, her main soporific.

Beside her on the bed, he began their story. “Once upon a time, in the big, big woods—” She flipped ecstatically at the known cadence. “Now, you relax. There was a tiny little creature name of Barry Mouse.”

“Mouff!” she cried, and sat straight up, as if she had heard one. She looked down at him for confirmation.

“Barry Mouse,” he said. “And one day, when Barry Mouse was walking through the woods, he came to a great big tree, and in the top of the great big tree what do you think there was?”

At last she yielded to the insistent pressure of his hand and fell back, her heavy blond head sinking into the pillow. He repeated, “What do you think there was?”

“Owl.”

“That’s right. Up at the top of the tree there was an owl, and the owl said, ‘I’m going to eat you, Barry Mouse.’ And Barry Mouse said, ‘No, no.’ So Owl said, ‘O.K., then why don’t you hop on my back and we’ll fly to the moon?’ And so Barry Mouse hopped on Owl’s back and awaay they went—”

Jane turned on her side, so her great face was an inch from his. She giggled and drummed her feet against his abdomen, solidly. Neither Lee nor his wife, who shared the one bedtime story, had ever worked out what happened on the moon. Once the owl and the mouse were aloft, their imaginations collapsed. Knowing his voice daren’t stop now, when the child’s state was possibly transitional and he felt as if he were bringing to his lips an absolutely brimful glass of liquid, he continued with some nonsense about cinnamon trees and Chinese maidens, no longer bothering to keep within the child’s vocabulary. Little Jane began touching his face with her open mouth, a sure sign she was sleepy. “Hey,” he murmured when one boneless moist kiss landed directly on his lips. “Jane is so sleepy,” he said, “because Daddy is sleepy, and Mommy is sleepy, and Bear is ssleepy, and Doll is sssleeepy.…”

She lay quiet, her face in shadow, her fine straight yellow hair fanned across the pillow. Neither he nor his wife was blond; they had brown hair, rat-color. There was little blondness in either family: just Jane’s Aunt Ruth, and Lee’s sister, Margaret, eight years older than he and married before he had left grade school. She had been the good one of the children and he the bright, difficult one.

Presuming his daughter asleep, he lifted himself on one elbow. She kicked his belly, rolled onto her back, and said in a voice loud with drowsiness, “Baaiy Mouff.”

Stroking her strange hair, he began again, “Once upon a time, in the deep, deep woods, there lived a little creature …” This time, he seemed to succeed.

As he lowered her into her crib, her eyes opened. He said, “O.K.?”

She pronounced beautifully, “O.K.”

“Gee, she’s practically epileptic with energy,” he said, blinded by the brilliant light of the room where his wife had remained.

“She’s a good child,” Jane affirmed, speaking out of her thoughts while left alone rather than in answer to his remark. “Your dessert is on the table.” She had kept hers intact on the sofa beside her, so they could eat their raspberry whip together. She also had beside her an orange-juice glass half full of vermouth.

When the clock said seven-fifty, he said, “Why don’t you run off to the movie? You never have any fun.”

“All right,” she said. “Go ahead. Go.”

“No, I don’t mean that. I mean you should go.” Still, he smiled.

“You can go as a reward for putting her to sleep.”

“Venus, I don’t want to go,” he said, without great emphasis, since at that moment he was rustling through the paper. He had difficulty finding the theatre section, and decided. “No, if you’re too tired, no one will. I can’t leave you. You need me too much.”

“If you want to, go; don’t torment me about it,” she said, drawing on her vermouth and staring into The New Republic.

“Do you think,” he asked, “when Jane is sixteen, she’ll go around in the back seat of Chevrolets and leave her poor old daddy?”

“I hope so,” Jane said.

“Will she have your bosom?”

“She’ll think it’s her own.”

He earnestly tried to visualize his daughter matured, and saw little but a charm bracelet on a slim, fair wrist. The forearms of teen-age girls tapered amazingly, toward little cages of bird bones. Charm bracelets were démodé already, he supposed.

Lee, committed to a long leisured evening at home, of the type that seemed precious on the nights when they had to go out, was unnerved by its wide opportunities. He nibbled at the reading matter closest to hand—an article, “Is the Individual a Thing of the Past?,” and last Sunday’s comic section. At Alley Oop he checked himself and went into the kitchen. Thinking of the oatmeal cookies habitual in his parents’ home, he opened the cupboard and found four kinds of sugar and seven of cereal, five infants’ and two adults’. Jane was always buying some esoteric grind of sugar for a pastrymaking project, then discovering she couldn’t use it. He smiled at this foible and carried his smile like an egg on a spoon into the living room, where his wife saw it but of course not the point of it, that it was a smile generated by love of her. He leaned his forehead against the bookcase, by the anthology shelf, and considered all the poetry he had once read evaporating in him, a vast dying sea.

As he stood there, his father floated from behind and possessed him, occupying specifically the curved area of the jawbone. He understood perfectly why that tall stoical man was a Mason, church-council member, and Scout-troop leader, always with an excuse for leaving the house.

Jane, concentrating all the pleasures her day had withheld into the hour remaining before she became too drowsy to think, put Bach on the record-player. As she did so, her back and arms made angles reminding him of her more angular, less drowsy college self.

When she returned to the sofa, he asked, “What makes you so pretty?” Then, having to answer it himself, he said, “Childbearing.”

Preoccupied with some dim speckled thinker in her magazine, she fondled the remark briefly and set it aside, mistakenly judging it to be a piece of an obscure, ill-tempered substance—him “getting at” her. He poured a little vermouth for himself and struck a pose by the mantel, trying to find with his legs and shoulders angles equivalent in effect to those she had made putting on the record. As she sat there, studious, he circumscribed her, every detail, with the tidal thought Mine, mine. She wasn’t watching. She thought she knew what to expect from him, tonight at least.

Later, he resolved, and, in a mood of resolution, read straight through the Jones Very section of F. O. Matthiessen’s anthology of American poetry. The poet’s stubborn sensibility aroused a readerly stubbornness; when Lee had finished, it was too late, the hour had slipped by. By the clock it was ten-thirty; for his wife, having risen with little Jane, it was after one. Her lids were pink. This was one of those days when you sow and not reap.

Two hissing, clattering elves working a minor fairy-tale transposition, together they lifted the crib containing the sleeping girl and carried it into the living room, and shut the doors. Instead of undressing, Jane picked up odds and ends of his—spare shoes and the socks he had worn yesterday and the tie he had worn today. Next she went into the bathroom and emerged wearing a cotton nightie. In bed beside him she read a page of Swann’s Way and fell asleep under the harsh light. He turned it off and thought furiously, the family’s second insomniac. The heat of Jane’s body made the bed stuffy. He hated these low beds; he lay miles below the ceiling, deep in the pit. The radiator, hidden in the windowsill by his head, breathed lavishly. High above, through a net of crosses, a few stars strove where the brownish glow of New York’s night sky gave out. The child cried once, but, thank God, in her sleep.

He recalled what he always forgot in the interval of day, his insomnia game. Last night he had finished D in a burst of glory: Yvonne Dionne, Zuleika Dobson. He let the new letter be G. Senator Albert Gore. Benny Goodman, Constance Garnett, David Garnett, Edvard Grieg. Goethe was Wolfgang and Gorki was Maxim. Farley Granger, Graham Greene (or Greta Garbo, or George Gobel), Henry Green. I was always difficult. You kept thinking of Ilka Chase. He wrestled and turned and cursed his wife, her heedless rump way on his side. To ward off the temptation to nudge her awake, he padded after a glass of water, grimacing into the mirror. As he returned his head to the cooled pillow, it came to him, first name and surname both at once: Ira Gershwin. Ira Gershwin: he savored it before proceeding. John Galsworthy, Kathryn Grayson … Lou Gehrig, poor devil …

He and Jane walked along a dirt road, in high, open-field country, like the farm owned by Mark, his mother’s brother. He was glad that Jane was seeing the place, because while he was growing up it had given him a sense of wealth to have an uncle attached to a hundred such well-kept acres. His relationship with Jane seemed to be at that stage when it was important for each side of the betrothal to produce external signs of respectability. “But I am even richer,” he abruptly announced. She appeared not to notice. They walked companionably but in silence, and seemed responsible for the person with them, a female their height. Lee gathered the impression, despite a veil against his eyes, that this extra girl was blonde and sturdy and docile. His sense of her sullenness may have been nothing but his anxiety to win her approval, reflected. Though her features were hard to make out, the emotion he bore her was precise: the coppery, gratified, somewhat adrift feeling he would get when physically near girls he admired in high school. The wind had darkened and grown purposeful.

Jane went back, though the countryside remained the same, and he was dousing, with a lawn hose attached to the side of the house, the body of this third person. Her head rested on the ground; he held her ankles and slowly, easily turned the light, stiff mass, to wet every area. It was important that water wash over every bit of skin. He was careful; the task, like rinsing the suds off of an automobile, was absorbing, rather than pleasant or unpleasant.