# Walter Briggs

# John Updike

COMING BACK FROM BOSTON, Jack drove, his baby son slept in a Carry-Cot on the front seat beside him, and in the back seat Claire sang to their girl, Jo, age two.

“When the pie was open, the birds began to—?”

“King,” the child said.

“Wasn’t that a dainty dish, to set before the—?”

“King!”

“That’s right.”

“Sing birdy nose song.”

“Sing birdy nose song? I don’t know the birdy nose song. *You* sing the birdy nose song. How does it go?”

“How does go?”

“I’m asking you. Who sings you the birdy nose song? Did Miss Duni do that?”

Jo laughed at the old joke; “Miss Duni” was a phrase that had popped magically from her mouth one day. “Who’s Miss Duni?” she asked now.

“*I* don’t know who Miss Duni is. You’re the one who knows Miss Duni. When did she teach you the birdy nose song?”

“Birdy nose, birdy nose, knock knock knock,” the little girl chanted lightly.

“What a *good* song! I wish Miss Duni would teach it to me.”

“It’s the second stanza of the blackbird song,” Jack said. “Down came a blackbird and picked off her nose.”

“I’ve *never* sung it to her,” Claire vowed.

“But you know it. It’s in your genes.”

In ten minutes—the trip took fifty—the child fell asleep, and Claire eased this weight off her lap. Then, turning from a mother into a wife, she rested her chin on the back of the front seat, near Jack’s shoulder, and breathed on the right side of his neck.

“Who did you like best at the party?” he asked.

“I don’t know, really. It’s hard. I’ll say Langmuir, because he saw what I meant about Sherman Adams.”

“Everybody saw what you meant; it’s just that everybody saw it was beside the point.”

“It wasn’t.”

“Who’s best,” he asked her, “Langmuir or Behnie?” This game, Who’s Best?, was one of their few devices for whiling away enforced time together. A poor game, it lacked the minimal element of competition needed to excite Jack.

“I suppose Langmuir,” Claire said, after taking thought.

“Knifing poor old Behnie in the back. And he loves you so.”

“He *is* kind; I hate myself. Uh—who’s best, Behnie, or the boy with the cleft chin and the help-me eyes?”

“The boy with the help-me eyes,” he promptly answered. “Oh, he’s awful. What *is* his name?”

“Crowley? Cra— Crackers?”

“Something like that. Graham Crackers. What was the name of the girl he was with with the big ears who was so lovely?”

“The poor thing, whatever makes her think she can wear those bobbly gold gypsy hoops?”

“She’s not ashamed of her ears. She’s proud. She thinks they’re grand. Which they are—a lovely girl. To think, I may never see her again.”

“*Her* name had *o*’s in it.”

“Orlando. Ooh-Ooh Orlando, the soap-bubble queen.”

“Not quite.”

The highway made a white pyramid in the headlights; the murmur of the motor sounded lopsided, and occasionally a whiff of gasoline haunted the car’s interior. *Fuel pump*, he thought, and visualized jets of explosive fluid spraying the piping-hot metal. Pieces of dirt had always been getting into the fuel pump of his father’s old Buick, and the car would flood and stall. “This car is going to start costing us money soon,” he said, and got no response. He glanced at the speedometer and said, “Forty-three thousand miles it’s travelled for us.” He added, “Birdy nose, birdy nose, knock knock knock.”

Claire laughed abruptly, at something she had thought of. “I know. What was the name of that fat man at Arrow Island who stayed the whole summer and played bridge every night and wore a droopy fisherman’s hat?”

He laughed, too, at her recalling this man. The first three months of their married life, five years ago, had been spent at a YMCA family camp on an island in a New Hampshire lake. Jack had worked as registrar, and his bride had run the camp store. “Walter,” he began confidently. “Then something monosyllabic. He was always fishing down by that row of men’s tents and was there when we got there and stayed after we left, to help them take the metal pier down.” He could see everything about the man: his sly cat’s smile, the peak of hair at the back of his head, his hemispherical stomach, his candy-striped T-shirt, and his crepe-soled shoes.

“Give me,” Claire went on, “Mrs. Young’s first name.” Young, a chain-smoking failed minister, had been in charge of the camp; his wife was a short thick-necked woman with a square face and alert green eyes and, like so many wives of “good” men, a rather tart tongue. Once, she had called up from the mainland with an excursion of children, and Jack, overworked, had forgotten to tell the Dartmouth boy who ran the launch, and when she called an hour later, still waiting with these whiny children on the hot mainland, Jack had exclaimed into the faint telephone (the underwater cable was all but eaten away), “How ghastly!” After that, all summer, she called him How Gawstly. Coming into the office, she would rasp, “And how’s old How Gawstly today?” and Jack would blush.

“Marguerite,” he said.

“Right,” Claire said. “Now their two girls.”

“One was Muffie, she was the tractable one. And the other—”

“*I* know.”

“Wait. Muffie and—it kind of rhymed. Muffie and Toughie.”

“Audrey. She had a chipped front tooth.”

“*Very* good. Now let’s think about that fat man. It began with *B*. Baines. Bodds. Byron. They went together, so you never thought of him as one name or the other but as both run together. Walter Buh, buh—isn’t that maddening?”

“Byron sounds close. Remember he was so good at shuffle-board, and organized the tournaments every week?”

“He played cards at night, in the rec hall. I can just *see* him, sitting there, on a brown, steel, folding chair.”

“Didn’t he live the rest of the year in Florida?” she asked, laughing at the idea of a man spending his entire year in vacation spots, and laughing further because, if you tried to imagine such a man, who could he be but lazy, complacent Walter Somebody?

“He used to sell plumbing equipment,” Jack said with triumph. “He was retired.” But this avenue, like the others, queerly failed to lead to the sanctum where the man’s name was hidden. “I can remember their professions but not their names,” he said, anxious to score something in his own favor, for he felt his wife was getting ahead of him at this game. “I should remember them all,” he went on. “I wrote all their names down on those damn registration cards.”

“Yes, you should. Who was that girl who had to leave the island because she started throwing stones at people?”

“God, yes. Mentally disturbed, and *aw*fully good-looking. And never said anything.”

“She used to stand under trees and brood.”

“Oh, how Young worried with her! And that other Special Case, who was always coming back on the train, and said his brother in Springfield would pay, and the Y had this special fund he thought was all for him.…”

“He loved chess so. Checkers. I guess you tried to teach him chess.”

“Everything you’d show him on the board, he’d say, ‘Pretty neat,’ or ‘You’re a mighty smart fella.’ ”

“And every time you’d say anything he’d sense you thought was funny, he’d laugh hysterically, that high laugh. He loved us, because we were nice to him.”

“Robert—”

“*Roy*, darling; how could you forget Roy? And then there was Peg Grace.”

“Peg, Grace. Those huge eyes.”

“And that tiny long nose with the nostrils shaped like water wings,” Claire said. “Now: tell me the name of her pasty-faced boyfriend.”

“With the waxy blond hair. Lord. I can’t con*ceiv*ably hope to remember his name. He was only there a week.”

“I always remember him coming up from the lake after swimming. That long white body and then those tiny black bathing trunks: sexy. Oogh.”

“He *was* white. But not unpleasant. In retrospect,” Jack announced pompously, “I like them all, except the German kitchen boy with curly hair he thought was so cute and apoplectic cheeks.”

“You didn’t like him because he was always making eyes at me.”

“Was he? Yes, he was, now that I think. The thing I really had against him, though, was that he beat me so badly in the broad jump. Then the Peruvian beat him, happily.”

“Escobar.”

“*I* knew his name. He was always trying to play basketball with his head.”

“And then Barbara, the gay divorcee.”

“Walter Barbara. Walter Ba, Be, Bi, Bo, Bu. He had a monstrous bill at the end of the summer, I remember that.”

But Claire was no longer waiting for the fat man. She danced ahead, calling into color vast faded tracts of that distant experience: the Italian family with all the empty beer cans, the tall deaf-mute who went around barefoot and punctured the skin of his foot on a chopped root in the east path, the fire hazard until those deadly August rains, the deer on the island that they never saw. The deer had come over on the ice in the winter and the spring thaw had trapped them. It made him jealous, her store of explicit memories—the mother at dusk calling “Beryl, Beryl,” the gargantuan ice-cream cones the boys on Murray’s crew served themselves—but she moved among her treasures so quickly and gave them so generously he had to laugh at each new face and scene offered him, because these were memories they had collected together and he was happy that they had discovered such a good game for the car just when he feared there were no more games for them. They reached the region of small familiar roads, and he drove a long way around, to prolong the trip a minute.

Home, they carried the children to bed—Claire the tiny boy, as fragile as a paper construction, and Jack the heavy, flushed girl. As he lowered her into the crib, she opened her eyes in the darkness.

“Home,” he told her.

“Whezouh dirt?” A new road was being bulldozed not far from their house, and she enjoyed being taken to see the mounds of earth.

“Dirt in the morning,” Jack said, and Jo accepted this.

Downstairs, the two adults got the ginger ale out of the refrigerator and watched the eleven-o’clock news on provincial television, Governor Furcolo and Archbishop Cushing looming above Khrushchev and Nasser, and went to bed hastily, against the children’s morning rising. Claire fell asleep immediately, after her long day of entertaining them all.

Jack felt he had made an unsatisfactory showing. Their past was so much more vivid to her presumably because it was more precious. Something she had mentioned nagged him. The German boy’s making eyes at her. Slowly this led him to remember how she had been, the green shorts and the brown legs, holding his hand as in the mornings they walked to breakfast from their cabin, along a lane that was two dusty paths for the wheels of the camp Jeep. Like the deaf-mute, Claire had gone around barefoot, and she walked between the paths, on the soft broad mane of weeds. Her hand had seemed so small, her height so sweetly adjusted to his, the fact of her waking him so strange. She always heard the breakfast bell, though it rang far away. Their cabin was far from the center of things; its only light had been a candle. Each evening (except Thursday, when he played right field for the staff softball team), in the half-hour between work and dinner, while she made the bed within, he had sat outside on a wooden chair, reading in dwindling daylight *Don Quixote*. It was all he had read that summer, but he had read that, in half-hours, every dusk, and in September cried at the end, when Sancho pleads with his at last sane master to rise from his deathbed and lead another quest, and perhaps they shall find the Lady Dulcinea under some hedge, stripped of her enchanted rags and as fine as any queen. All around the cabin had stood white pines stretched to a cruel height by long competition, and the cabin itself had no windows, but broken screens. Pausing before the threshold, on earth littered with needles and twigs, he unexpectedly found what he wanted; he lifted himself on his elbow and called “Claire” softly, knowing he wouldn’t wake her, and said, “Briggs. Walter Briggs.”