# The Persistence of Desire

# John Updike

PENNYPACKER’S OFFICE still smelled of linoleum, a clean, sad scent that seemed to lift from the checkerboard floor in squares of alternating intensity; this pattern had given Clyde as a boy a funny nervous feeling of intersection, and now he stood crisscrossed by a double sense of himself, his present identity extending down from Massachusetts to meet his disconsolate youth in Pennsylvania, projected upward from a distance of years. The enlarged, tinted photograph of a lake in the Canadian wilderness still covered one whole wall, and the walnut-stained chairs and benches continued their vague impersonation of the Shaker manner. The one new thing, set squarely on an orange end table, was a compact black clock constructed like a speedometer; it showed in arabic numerals the present minute—1:28—and coiled invisibly in its works the two infinities of past and future. Clyde was early; the waiting room was empty. He sat down on a chair opposite the clock. Already it was 1:29, and while he watched, the digits slipped again: another drop into the brimming void. He glanced around for the comfort of a clock with a face and gracious, gradual hands. A stopped grandfather matched the other imitation antiques. He opened a magazine and immediately read, “Science reveals that the cells of the normal human body are replaced *in toto* every seven years.”

The top half of a Dutch door at the other end of the room opened, and, framed in the square, Pennypacker’s secretary turned the bright disc of her face toward him. “Mr. Behn?” she asked in a chiming voice. “Dr. Pennypacker will be back from lunch in a minute.” She vanished backward into the maze of little rooms where Pennypacker, an eye, ear, nose, and throat man, had arranged his fabulous equipment. Through the bay window Clyde could see traffic, gayer in color than he remembered, hustle down Grand Avenue. On the sidewalk, haltered girls identical in all but name with girls he had known strolled past in twos and threes. Small-town perennials, they moved rather mournfully under their burdens of bloom. In the opposite direction packs of the opposite sex carried baseball mitts.

Clyde became so lonely watching his old street that when, with a sucking exclamation, the door from the vestibule opened, he looked up gratefully, certain that the person, this being his home town, would be a friend. When he saw who it was, although every cell in his body had been replaced since he had last seen her, his hands jerked in his lap and blood bounded against his skin.

“Clyde Behn,” she pronounced, with a matronly and patronizing yet frightened finality, as if he were a child and these words the moral of a story.

“Janet.” He awkwardly rose from his chair and crouched, not so much in courtesy as to relieve the pressure on his heart.

“Whatever brings you back to these parts?” She was taking the pose that she was just anyone who once knew him.

He slumped back. “I’m always coming back. It’s just you’ve never been here.”

“Well, I’ve”—she seated herself on an orange bench and crossed her plump legs cockily—“been in Germany with my husband.”

“He was in the Air Force.”

“Yes.” It startled her a little that he knew.

“And he’s out now?” Clyde had never met him, but, having now seen Janet again, he felt he knew him well—a slight, literal fellow, to judge from the shallowness of the marks he had left on her. He would wear eyebrow-style glasses, be a griper, have some not-quite-negotiable talent, like playing the clarinet or drawing political cartoons, and now be starting up a drab avenue of business. Selling insurance, most likely. Poor Janet, Clyde felt; except for the interval of himself—his splendid, perishable self—she would never see the light. Yet she had retained her beautiful calm, an unsleeping tranquillity marked by that pretty little lavender puffiness below the eyes. And either she had grown slimmer or he had grown more tolerant of fat. Her thick ankles and the general *obstinacy* of her flesh used to goad him into being cruel.

“Yes.” Her voice indicated that she had withdrawn; perhaps some ugliness of their last parting had recurred to her.

“I was 4-F.” He was ashamed of this, and his confessing it, though she seemed unaware of the change, turned their talk inward. “A peacetime slacker,” he went on, “what could be more ignoble?”

She was quiet a while, then asked, “How many children do you have?”

“Two. Age three and one. A girl and a boy; very symmetrical. Do you”—he blushed lightly, and brushed at his forehead to hide it—“have any?”

“No, we thought it wouldn’t be fair, until we were more fixed.”

Now the quiet moment was his to hold; she had matched him failing for failing. She recrossed her legs, and in a quaint strained way smiled.

“I’m trying to remember,” he admitted, “the last time we saw each other. I can’t remember how we broke up.”

“I can’t either,” she said. “It happened so often.”

Clyde wondered if with that sarcasm she intended to fetch his eyes to the brink of tears. Probably not; premeditation had never been much of a weapon for her, though she had tried to learn it from him.

He moved across the linoleum to sit on the bench beside her. “I can’t tell you,” he said, “how much, of all the people in this town, you were the one I wanted to see.” It was foolish, but he had prepared it to say, in case he ever saw her again.

“Why?” This was more like her: blunt, pucker-lipped curiosity. He had forgotten it.

“Well, hell. Any number of reasons. I wanted to say something.”

“What?”

“Well, that if I hurt you it was stupidity, because I was young. I’ve often wondered since if I did, because it seems now that you were the only person outside my family who ever, actually, *liked* me.”

“Did I?”

“If you think by doing nothing but asking monosyllabic questions you’re making an effect, you’re wrong.”

She averted her face, leaving, in a sense, only her body—the pale, columnar breadth of arm, the freckled crescent of shoulder muscle under the cotton strap of her summer dress—with him. “You’re the one who’s making effects.” It was such a wan, senseless thing to say to defend herself; Clyde, virtually paralyzed by so heavy an injection of love, touched her arm icily.

With a quickness that suggested she had foreseen this, she got up and went to the table by the bay window, where rows of overlapping magazines were laid. She bowed her head to their titles, the nape of her neck in shadow beneath a half-collapsed bun. She had always had trouble keeping her hair pinned.

Clyde was blushing intensely. “Is your husband working around here?”

“He’s looking for work.” That she kept her back turned while saying this gave him hope.

“Mr. Behn?” The petite secretary-nurse, switching like a pendulum, led him back through the sanctums and motioned for him to sit in a high hinged chair padded with black leather. Pennypacker’s equipment had always made him nervous; tons of it were marshalled through the rooms. A complex tree of tubes and lenses leaned over his left shoulder, and by his right elbow a porcelain basin was cupped expectantly. An eye chart crisply stated gibberish. In time Pennypacker himself appeared: a tall, stooped man with mottled cheekbones and an air of suppressed anger.

“Now what’s the trouble, Clyde?”

“It’s nothing; I mean it’s very little,” Clyde began, laughing inappropriately. During his adolescence he had developed a joking familiarity with his dentist and his regular doctor, but he had never become cozy with Pennypacker, who remained, what he had seemed at first, an aloof administrator of expensive humiliations. He had made Clyde wear glasses when he was in the third grade. Later, he annually cleaned, with a shrill push of hot water, wax from Clyde’s ears, and once had thrust two copper straws up Clyde’s nostrils in a futile attempt to purge his sinuses. Clyde always felt unworthy of Pennypacker—felt himself to be a dirty conduit balking the smooth onward flow of the doctor’s reputation and apparatus. He blushed to mention his latest trivial stoppage. “It’s just that for over two months I’ve had this eyelid that twitters and it makes it difficult to think.”

Pennypacker drew little circles with a pencil-sized flashlight in front of Clyde’s right eye.

“It’s the left lid,” Clyde said, without daring to turn his head. “I went to a doctor up where I live, and he said it was like a rattle in the fender and there was nothing to do. He said it would go away, but it didn’t and didn’t, so I had my mother make an appointment for when I came down here to visit.”

Pennypacker moved to the left eye and drew even closer. The distance between the doctor’s eyes and the corners of his mouth was very long; the emotional impression of his face close up was like that of those first photographs taken from rockets, in which the earth’s curvature was made apparent. “How do you like being in your home territory?” Pennypacker asked.

“Fine.”

“Seem a little strange to you?”

The question itself seemed strange. “A little.”

“Mm. That’s interesting.”

“About the eye, there were two things I thought,” Clyde said. “One was, I got some glasses made in Massachusetts by a man nobody else ever went to, and I thought his prescription might be faulty. His equipment seemed so ancient and kind of full of cobwebs—like a Dürer print.” He never could decide how cultured Pennypacker was; the Canadian lake argued against it, but he was county-famous in his trade, in a county where doctors were as high as the intellectual scale went.

The flashlight, a tepid sun girdled by a grid of optical circles behind which Pennypacker’s face loomed dim and colorless, came right to the skin of Clyde’s eye, and the vague face lurched forward angrily, and Clyde, blind in a world of light, feared that Pennypacker was inspecting the floor of his soul. Paralyzed by panic, he breathed, “The other was that something might be in it. At night it feels as if there’s a tiny speck deep in under the lid.”

Pennypacker reared back and insolently raked the light back and forth across Clyde’s face. “How long have you had this flaky stuff on your lids?”

The insult startled Clyde. “Is there any?”

“How long have you had it?”

“Some mornings I notice little grains like salt that I thought were what I used to call sleepy-dust—”

“This isn’t sleepy-dust,” the doctor said. He repeated, “This isn’t sleepy-dust.” Clyde started to smile at what he took to be kidding of his babyish vocabulary, but Pennypacker cut him short with “Cases of this can lead to loss of the eyelashes.”

“Really?” Clyde was vain of his lashes, which in his boyhood had been exceptionally long, giving his face the alert and tender look of a girl’s. “Do you think it’s the reason for the tic?” He imagined his face with the lids bald and the lashes lying scattered on his cheeks like insect legs. “What can I do?”

“Are you using your eyes a great deal?”

“Some. No more than I ever did.”

Pennypacker’s hands, blue after Clyde’s dazzlement, lifted an intensely brown bottle from a drawer. “It may be bacteria, it may be allergy; when you leave I’ll give you something that should knock it out either way. Do you follow me? Now, Clyde”—his voice became murmurous and consolatory as he placed a cupped hand, rigid as an electrode, on the top of Clyde’s head—“I’m going to put some drops in your eyes so we can check the prescription of the glasses you bought in Massachusetts.”

Clyde didn’t remember that the drops stung so; he gasped outright and wept while Pennypacker held the lids apart with his fingers and worked them gently open and shut, as if he were playing with snapdragons. Pennypacker set preposterously small, circular dark-brown glasses on Clyde’s face and in exchange took away the stylish horn-rims Clyde had kept in his pocket. It was Pennypacker’s method to fill his little rooms with waiting patients and wander from one to another like a dungeon-keeper.

Clyde heard, far off, the secretary’s voice tinkle, and, amplified by the hollow hall, Pennypacker’s rumble in welcome and Janet’s respond. The one word “headaches,” petulantly emphasized, stood up in her answer. Then a door was shut. Silence.

Clyde admired how matter-of-fact she had sounded. He had always admired this competence in her, her authority in the world peripheral to the world of love, in which she was so docile. He remembered how she could face up to waitresses and teachers and how she would bluff her mother when this vigilant woman unexpectedly entered the screened porch where they were supposed to be playing cribbage. Potted elephant plants sat in the corners of the porch like faithful dwarfs; robins had built a nest in the lilac outside, inches from the screen. It had been taken as an omen, a blessing, when, one evening, their being on the glider no longer distressed the robins.

The wallpaper he saw through the open door seemed as distinct as ever. Unlike, say, the effects of Novocain, the dilation of pupils is impalpable. He held his fingernails close to his nose and was unable to distinguish the cuticles. He touched the sides of his nose, where tears had left trails. He looked at his fingers again, and they seemed fuzzier. He couldn’t see his fingerprint whorls. The threads of his shirt had melted into an elusive liquid surface.

A door opened and closed, and another patient was ushered into a consulting room and imprisoned by Pennypacker. Janet’s footsteps had not mingled with the others. Without ever quite sacrificing his reputation for good behavior, Clyde in high school had become fairly bold in heckling teachers he considered stupid or unjust. He got out of his chair, looked down the hall to where a white splinter of secretary showed, and quickly walked past a closed door to one ajar. His blood told him, *This one*.

Janet was sitting in a chair as upright as the one he had left, a two-pronged comb in her mouth, her back arched, and her arms up, bundling her hair. As he slipped around the door, she plucked the comb from between her teeth and laughed at him. He saw in a little rimless mirror cocked above her head his own head, grimacing with stealth and grotesquely costumed in glasses like two chocolate coins, and appreciated her laughter, though it didn’t fit with what he had prepared to say. He said it anyway: “Janet, are you happy?”

She rose with a practical face and walked past him and clicked the door shut. As she stood facing it, listening for a reaction from outside, he gathered her hair in his hand and lifted it from the nape of her neck, which he had expected to find in shadow but which was instead, to his distended eyes, bright as a candle. He clumsily put his lips to it.

“Don’t you love your wife?” she asked.

“Incredibly much,” he murmured into the fine neck-down.

She moved off, leaving him leaning awkwardly, and in front of the mirror smoothed her hair away from her ears. She sat down again, crossing her wrists in her lap.

“I just got told my eyelashes are going to fall out,” Clyde said.

“Your pretty lashes,” she said somberly.

“Why do you hate me?”

“Shh. I don’t hate you now.”

“But you did once.”

“No, I did *not* once. Clyde, what *is* this bother? What are you after?”

“Son of a bitch, so I’m a bother. I knew it. You’ve just forgotten, all the time I’ve been remembering; you’re so *damn* dense. I come in here a bundle of pain to tell you I’m sorry and I want you to be happy, and all I get is the back of your neck.” Affected by what had happened to his eyes, his tongue had loosened, pouring out impressions; with culminating incoherence he dropped to his knees beside her chair, wondering if the thump would bring Pennypacker. “I must see you again,” he blurted.

“Shh.”

“I come back here and the only person who was ever pleasant to me I discover I maltreated so much she hates me.”

“Clyde,” she said, “you didn’t maltreat me. You were a sweet boy to me.”

Straightening up on his knees, he fumbled his fingers around the hem of the neck of her dress and pulled it out and looked down into the blurred cavity between her breasts. He had a remembrance of her freckles going down from her shoulders into her bathing suit. His glasses hit her cheek.

She stabbed the back of his hand with the points of her comb and he got to his feet, rearing high into a new, less sorrowful atmosphere. “When?” he asked, short of breath.

“No,” she said.

“What’s your married name?”

“Clyde, I thought you were successful. I thought you had beautiful children. Aren’t you happy?”

“I am, I am; but”—the rest was so purely inspired its utterance only grazed his lips—“happiness isn’t everything.”

Footsteps ticked down the hall, toward their door, past it. Fear emptied his chest, yet with an excellent imitation of his old high-school flippancy he blew her a kiss, waited, opened the door, and whirled through it. His hand had left the knob when the secretary, emerging from the room where he should have been, confronted him in the linoleum-smelling hall. “Where could I get a drink of water?” he asked plaintively, assuming the hunch and whine of a blind beggar. In truth, he had, without knowing it, become thirsty.

“Once a year I pass through your territory,” Pennypacker intoned as he slipped a growing weight of lenses into the apparatus on Clyde’s nose. He had returned to Clyde more relaxed and chatty, now that all his little rooms were full. Clyde had tried to figure out from the pattern of noise if Janet had been dismissed. He believed she had. The thought made his eyelid throb. He didn’t even know her married name. “Down the Turnpike,” Pennypacker droned on, while his face flickered in and out of focus, “up the New Jersey Pike, over the George Washington Bridge, up the Saw Mill, then Route 7 all the way to Lake Champlain. To hunt the big bass. There’s an experience for you.”

“I notice you have a new clock in your waiting room.”

“That’s a Christmas present from the Alton Optical Company. Can you read that line?”

“H, L, F, Y, T, something that’s either an S or an E—”

“K,” Pennypacker said without looking. The poor devil, he had all those letters memorized, all that gibberish—abruptly, Clyde wanted to love him. The oculist altered one lens. “Is it better this way? … Or this way?”

At the end of the examination, Pennypacker said, “Though the man’s equipment was dusty, he gave you a good prescription. In your right eye the axis of astigmatism has rotated several degrees, which is corrected in the lenses. If you have been experiencing a sense of strain, part of the reason, Clyde, is that these heavy tortoiseshell frames are slipping down on your nose and giving you a prismatic effect. For a firm fit you should have metal frames, with adjustable nose pads.”

“They leave such ugly dents on the sides of your nose.”

“You should have them. Your bridge, you see”—he tapped his own—“is recessed. It takes a regular face to support unarticulated frames. Do you wear your glasses all the time?”

“For the movies and reading. When I got them in the third grade you told me that was all I needed them for.”

“You should wear them all the time.”

“Really? Even just for walking around?”

“All the time, yes. You have middle-aged eyes.”

Pennypacker gave him a little plastic squeeze bottle of drops. “That is for the fungus on your lids.”

“Fungus? There’s a brutal thought. Well, will it cure the tic?”

Pennypacker impatiently snapped, “The tic is caused by muscular fatigue.”

Thus Clyde was dismissed into a tainted world where things evaded his focus. He went down the hall in his sunglasses and was told by the secretary that he would receive a bill. The waiting room was full now, mostly with downcast old men and myopic children gnawing at their mothers. From out of this crowd a ripe young woman arose and came against his chest, and Clyde, included in the close aroma her hair and skin gave off, felt weak and broad and grand, like a declining rose. Janet tucked a folded note into the pocket of his shirt and said conversationally, “He’s waiting outside in the car.”

The neutral, ominous “he” opened wide a conspiracy Clyde instantly entered. He stayed behind a minute, to give her time to get away. Ringed by the judging eyes of the young and old, he felt like an actor snug behind the blinding protection of the footlights; he squinted prolongedly at the speedometer-clock, which, like a letter delivered on the stage, in fact was blank. Then, smiling ironically toward both sides, he left the waiting room, coming into Pennypacker’s entrance hall, a cubicle equipped with a stucco umbrella stand and a red rubber mat saying, in letters so large he could read them, WALK IN.

He had not expected to be unable to read her note. He held it at arm’s length and slowly brought it toward his face, wiggling it in the light from outdoors. Though he did this several times, it didn’t yield even the simplest word, just wet blue specks. Under the specks, however, in their intensity and disposition, he believed he could make out the handwriting—slanted, open, unoriginal—familiar to him from other notes received long ago. This glimpse, through the skin of the paper, of Janet’s old self quickened and sweetened his desire more than touching her had. He tucked the note back into his shirt pocket and its stiffness there made a shield for his heart. In this armor he stepped into the familiar street. The maples, macadam, shadows, houses, cars were to his violated eyes as brilliant as a scene remembered; he became a child again in this town, where life was a distant adventure, a rumor, an always imminent joy.