# A Sense of Shelter

# John Updike

SNOW FELL against the high school all day, wet big-flaked snow that did not accumulate well. Sharpening two pencils, William looked down on a parking lot that was a blackboard in reverse; car tires had cut smooth arcs of black into the white, and wherever a school bus had backed around, it had left an autocratic signature of two *V*’s. The snow, though at moments it whirled opaquely, could not quite bleach these scars away. The temperature must be exactly freezing. The window was open a crack, and a canted pane of glass lifted outdoor air into his face, coating the cedarwood scent of pencil shavings with the transparent odor of the wet windowsill. With each revolution of the handle his knuckles came within a fraction of an inch of the tilted glass, and the faint chill this proximity breathed on them sharpened William’s already acute sense of shelter.

The sky behind the shreds of snow was stone-colored. The murk inside the high classroom gave the air a solidity that limited the overhead radiance to its own vessels: six globes of dull incandescence floated on the top of a thin sea. The feeling the gloom gave him was not gloomy but joyous; he felt they were all sealed in, safe; the colors of cloth were dyed deeper, the sound of whispers was made more distinct, the smells of tablet paper and wet shoes and varnish and face powder pierced him with a sharp sense of possession. These were his classmates sealed in, his, the stupid as well as the clever, the plain as well as the lovely, his enemies as well as his friends, his. He felt like a king and seemed to move to his seat between the bowed heads of subjects that loved him less than he loved them. His seat was sanctioned by tradition; for twelve years he had sat at the rear of classrooms, William Young, flanked by Marsha Wyckoff and Andy Zimmerman. Once there had been two Zimmermans, but one went to work in his father’s greenhouse, and in some classes—Latin and trig—there were none, and William sat at the edge of the class as if on the lip of a cliff, and Marsha Wyckoff became Marvin Wolf or Sandra Wade. It was always a desk, though; its surface altered from hour to hour but from the blue-stained ink well his mind could extract, like a chain of magicians’ handkerchiefs, memories from the first grade on.

As a senior he was a kind of king, and as a teacher’s pet another kind, a puppet king, who gathered in appointive posts and even, when the vote split between two football heroes, some elective ones. He was not popular, he had never had a girl, his intense friends of childhood had drifted off into teams and gangs, and in large groups—when the whole school, for instance, went in the fall to the beautiful, dung-and-cotton-candy-smelling county fair—he was always an odd man, without a seat on the bus home. But exclusion is itself a form of inclusion. He even had a nickname: Mip, because he stuttered. Taunts no longer much frightened him; he had come late into his physical inheritance, but this summer it had arrived, and he at last stood equal with his large, boisterous parents, and had to unbutton his shirt cuffs to get his wrists through them, and discovered he could pick up a basketball with one hand. So, his long legs blocking two aisles, he felt regal even in size and, almost trembling with happiness under the high globes of light beyond whose lunar glow invisible snowflakes were drowning on the gravel roof of his castle, he could believe that the long delay of unpopularity had been merely a consolidation, that he was at last strong enough to make his move. Today he would tell Mary Landis he loved her.

He had loved her ever since, a fat-faced tomboy with freckles and green eyes, she deftly stole his rubber-lined schoolbag on the walk back from second grade along Jewett Street and outran him—simply had better legs. The superior speed a boy was supposed to have failed to come; his kidneys burned with panic. In front of the grocery store next to her home she stopped and turned. She was willing to have him catch up. This humiliation on top of the rest was too much to bear. Tears broke in his throat; he spun around and ran home and threw himself on the floor of the front parlor, where his grandfather, feet twiddling, perused the newspaper and soliloquized all morning. In time the letter slot rustled, and the doorbell rang, and Mary gave his mother the schoolbag and the two of them politely exchanged whispers. Their voices had been to him, lying there on the carpet with his head wrapped in his arms, indistinguishable. Mother had always liked Mary. From when she had been a tiny girl dancing along the hedge on the end of an older sister’s arm, Mother had liked her. Out of all the children that flocked, similar as pigeons, through the neighborhood, Mother’s heart had reached out as if with claws and fastened on Mary. He never took the schoolbag to school again, he refused to touch it. He supposed it was still in the attic, still faintly smelling of its rubber lining.

Fixed high on the plaster like a wren clinging to a barn wall, the buzzer sounded the two-minute signal. In the middle of the classroom Mary Landis stood up, a Monitor badge pinned to her belly. Her broad red belt was buckled with a brass bow and arrow. She wore a lavender sweater with the sleeves pushed up to expose her forearms, a delicately cheap effect. Wild stories were told about her; perhaps it was merely his knowledge of these that put the hardness in her face. Her eyes seemed braced for squinting and their green was frosted. Her freckles had faded. William thought she laughed less this year; now that she was in the Secretarial Course and he in the College Preparatory, he saw her in only one class a day, this one, English. She stood a second, eclipsed at the thighs by Jack Stephens’ zebra-striped shoulders, and looked back at the class with a stiff, worn glance, as if she had seen the same faces too many times before. Her habit of perfect posture emphasized the angularity she had grown into. There was a nervous edge, a boxiness in her bones, that must have been waiting all along under the childish fat. Her eye sockets were deeply indented, and her chin had a prim set that seemed in the murky air tremulous and defiant. Her skirt was cut square and straight. Below the waist she was lean; the legs that had outrun him were still athletic; she starred at hockey and cheerleading. Above, she was ample: stacked. She turned and in switching up the aisle encountered a boy’s leg thrown into her path. She coolly looked down until it withdrew. She was used to such attentions. Her pronged chest poised, Mary proceeded out the door, and someone she saw in the hall made her smile, a wide smile full of warmth and short white teeth, and love scooped at William’s heart. He *would* tell her.

In another minute, the second bell rasped. Shuffling through the perfumed crowds to his next class, he crooned to himself, in the slow, overenunciated manner of the Negro vocalist who had brought the song back this year:

*“Lah-vender blue, dilly dilly*,

*Lavendih gree-heen;*

Eef *I were king, dilly dilly*,

*You would be queen.”*

The song gave him an exultant sliding sensation that intertwined with the pleasures of his day. He knew all the answers, he had done all the work, the teachers called upon him only to rebuke the ignorance of the others. In trig and soc. sci. both it was this way. In gym, the fourth hour of the morning, he, who was always picked near the last, startled his side by excelling at volleyball, leaping like a madman, shouting like a bully. The ball felt light as a feather against his big bones. His hair in wet quills from the shower, he walked in the icy air to Luke’s Luncheonette, where he ate three twenty-cent hamburgers in a booth with three juniors. There was Barry Kruppman, a tall, hyperthyroid-eyed boy who came on the school bus from the country town of Bowsville and who was an amateur hypnotist; he told the tale of a Portland, Oregon, businessman who under hypnosis had been taken back through sixteen reincarnations to the condition of an Egyptian concubine in the household of a high priest of Isis. There was Barry’s friend Lionel Griffin, a pudgy simp whose blond hair puffed out above his ears in two slick waxed wings. He was rumored to be a fairy, and in fact did seem most excited by the transvestite aspect of the soul’s transmigration. And there was Lionel’s female sidekick Virginia, a drab little mystery who chain-smoked English Ovals and never said anything. She had sallow skin and smudged eyes and Lionel kept jabbing her and shrieking, making William wince. He would rather have sat with members of his own class, who filled the other booths, but he would have had to force himself on them. These juniors welcomed his company. He asked, “Wuh-well, was he ever a c-c-c-cockroach, like Archy?”

Kruppman’s face grew serious; his furry lids dropped down over the bulge of his eyes, and when they drew back, his pupils were as small and hard as BBs. “That’s the really interesting thing. There was this gap, see, between his being a knight under Charlemagne and then a sailor on a ship putting out from Macedonia—that’s where Yugoslavia is now—in the time of Nero; there was this gap, when the only thing the guy would do was walk around the office snarling and growling, see, like this.” Kruppman worked his blotched ferret face up into a snarl and Griffin shrieked. “He tried to bite one of the assistants and they think that for six hundred years”—the uncanny, unhealthy seriousness of his whisper hushed Griffin momentarily—“for six hundred years he just was a series of wolves. Probably in the German forests. You see, when he was in Macedonia”—his whisper barely audible—“he murdered a woman.”

Griffin squealed in ecstasy and cried, “Oh, Kruppman! Kruppman, how you do go on!” and jabbed Virginia in the arm so hard an English Oval jumped from her hand and bobbled across the Formica table. William gazed over their heads in pain.

The crowd at the soda counter had thinned so that when the door to the outside opened he saw Mary come in and hesitate there for a second where the smoke inside and the snow outside swirled together. The mixture made a kind of—Kruppman’s ridiculous story had put the phrase in his head—wolf-weather, and she was just a gray shadow caught in it alone. She bought a pack of cigarettes from Luke and went out again, a kerchief around her head, the pneumatic thing above the door hissing behind her. For a long time she had been at the center of whatever gang was the one: in the second grade the one that walked home up Jewett Street together, and in the sixth grade the one that went bicycling as far away as the quarry and the Rentschler estate and played touch football Saturday afternoons, and in the ninth grade the one that went roller-skating at Candlebridge Park with the tenth-grade boys, and in the eleventh grade the one that held parties lasting past midnight and that on Sundays drove in caravans as far as Philadelphia and back. And all the while there had been a succession of boyfriends, first Jack Stephens and Fritz March in their class and then boys a grade ahead and then Barrel Lord, who was a senior when they were sophomores and whose name was in the newspapers all football season, and then, this last summer, someone out of the school altogether, a man she met while working as a waitress in Alton. So this year her weekends were taken up, and the party gang carried on as if she had never existed, and nobody saw her much except in school and when she stopped by in Luke’s to buy a pack of cigarettes. Her silhouette against the big window had looked wan, her head hooded, her face nibbled by light, her fingers fiddling on the veined counter with her coins. He yearned to reach out, to comfort her, but he was wedged deep in the shrill booths, between the jingling of the pinball machine and the twanging of the jukebox. The impulse left him with a disagreeable feeling. He had adored her too long to have his investment diminished by pity.

The two hours of the school afternoon held Latin and a study hall. In study hall, while the five people at the table with him played tic-tac-toe and sucked cough drops and yawned, he did all his homework for the next day. He prepared thirty lines of Vergil, Aeneas in the Underworld. The study hall was a huge low room in the basement of the building; its coziness crept into Tartarus. On the other side of the custard-colored wall the circular saw in the woodworking shop whined and gasped and then whined again; it bit off pieces of wood with a rising, somehow terrorized inflection—bzzzz*zup!* He solved ten problems in trigonometry. His mind cut neatly through their knots and separated them, neat stiff squares of answer, one by one from the long plank of problems that connected plane geometry with solid. Lastly, as the snow drifted down on a slant into the cement pits outside the steel-muntinned windows, he read a short story by Edgar Allan Poe. He closed the book softly on its pleasing final shudder. He gazed at the red, wet, menthol-scented inner membrane of Judy Whipple’s yawn, rimmed with flaking pink lipstick, and yielded his conscience to the snug sense of his work done, of the snow falling, of the warm minutes that walked through their shelter so slowly. The perforated acoustic tiling above his head seemed the lining of a tube that would go all the way: high school merging into college, college into graduate school, graduate school into teaching at a college—section man, assistant, associate, *full* professor, possessor of a dozen languages and a thousand books, a man brilliant in his forties, wise in his fifties, renowned in his sixties, revered in his seventies, and then retired, serenely waiting until the time came for the last transition from silence to silence, and he would die, like Tennyson, with a copy of *Cymbeline* beside him on the moon-drenched bed.

After school he had to go to Room 101 and cut a sports cartoon into a stencil for the school paper. He liked the high school best when it was nearly empty. Then the janitors went down the halls sowing seeds of red wax and making an immaculate harvest with broad brooms, gathering all the fluff and hairpins and wrappers and powder that the animals had dropped that day. The basketball team thumped in the hollow gymnasium; the cheerleaders rehearsed behind drawn curtains on the stage. In Room 101 two empty-headed typists with stripes bleached into their hair banged away between giggles and mistakes. At her desk Mrs. Gregory, the faculty sponsor, wearily passed her pencil through misspelled news copy on tablet paper. William took the shadow box from the top of the filing cabinet and the styluses and little square plastic shading screens from their drawer and the stencil from the closet where the typed stencils hung, like fragile scarves, on hooks. “B-BALLERS BOW, 57–42,” was the headline. He drew a tall b-baller bowing to a stumpy pagan idol, labelled “W” for victorious Weiserton High, and traced the drawing in the soft blue wax with the fine loop stylus. His careful breath grazed his knuckles. His eyebrows frowned while his heart bobbed happily on the giddy prattle of the typists. The shadow box was simply a black frame holding a pane of glass and lifted at one end by two legs so that the lightbulb, fitted in a metal tray, could slide underneath. As he worked, his eyes smarting, he mixed himself up with the lightbulb, felt himself burning under a slanting roof upon which a huge hand scratched. The glass grew hot; the danger in the job was pulling the softened wax with your damp hand, distorting or tearing the typed letters. Sometimes the center of an *o* stuck to your skin like a bit of blue confetti. But he was expert and cautious. He returned the things to their places feeling airily tall, heightened by Mrs. Gregory’s appreciation, which she expressed by keeping her back turned, in effect stating that other staff members were undependable but William did not need to be watched.

In the hall outside Room 101 only the shouts of a basketball scrimmage reverberated; the chant of the cheerleaders had been silenced. Though he had done everything, he felt reluctant to leave. Neither of his parents—both worked—would be home yet, and this building was equally his home. He knew all its nooks. On the second floor of the annex, beyond the art room, there was a strange, narrow boys’ lavatory that no one ever seemed to use. It was here one time that Barry Kruppman tried to hypnotize him and cure his stuttering. Kruppman’s voice purred and his irises turned tiny in the bulging whites and for a moment William felt himself lean backward involuntarily, but he was distracted by the bits of bloodshot vein in the corners of those popping eyes. The folly of giving up his will to this weirdo occurred to him; he refused to let go and go under, and perhaps therefore his stuttering had continued.

The frosted window at the end of the long little room cast a watery light on the green floor and made the porcelain urinals shine like slices of moon. William washed his hands with exaggerated care, enjoying the lavish amount of powdered soap provided for him in this civic castle. He studied his face in the mirror, making infinitesimal adjustments to attain the absolutely most flattering angle, and then put his hands below his throat to get their strong, long-fingered beauty into the picture. As he walked toward the door he sang, closing his eyes and gasping as if he were a real Negro whose entire career depended upon the recording:

*“Who—told me so, dilly dilly*,

*Who told me soho?*

Aii *told myself, dilly dilly*,

*I told me so.”*

When he emerged into the hall it was not empty: one girl walked down its varnished perspective toward him, Mary Landis, a scarf on her head and books in her arms. Her locker was up here, on the second floor of the annex. His own was in the annex basement. A ticking sensation that existed neither in the medium of sound nor of light crowded against his throat. She flipped the scarf back from her hair and in a conversational voice that carried well down the clean planes of the hall said, “Hi, Billy.” The name came from way back, when they were both children, and made him feel small but brave.

“Hi. How are you?”

“Fine.” Her smile broadened out from the *F* of this word.

What was so funny? Was she really, as it seemed, pleased to see him? “Du-did you just get through cheer-cheer-cheerleading?”

“Yes. Thank God. *Oh*, she’s so awful. She makes us do the same stupid locomotives for every cheer; I told her, no wonder nobody cheers any more.”

“This is M-M-Miss Potter?” He blushed, feeling that he made an ugly face in getting past the *M*. When he got caught in the middle of a sentence the constriction was somehow worse. He admired the way words poured up her throat, distinct and petulant.

“Yes, Potbottom Potter,” she said, “she’s just aching for a man and takes it out on us. I wish she would get one. Honestly, Billy, I have half a mind to quit. I’ll be so glad when June comes, I’ll never set foot in this idiotic building again.”

Her lips, pale with the lipstick worn off, crinkled bitterly. Foreshortened from the height of his eyes, her face looked cross as a cat’s. It a little shocked him that poor Miss Potter and this kind, warm school stirred her to what he had to take as actual anger; this grittiness in her was the first abrasive texture he had struck today. Couldn’t she see around teachers, into their fatigue, their poverty, their fear? It had been so long since he had spoken to her, he wasn’t sure how coarse she had become. “Don’t quit,” he brought out of his mouth at last. “It’d be n-n-n-nuh—it’d be nothing without you.”

He pushed open the door at the end of the hall for her and as she passed under his arm she looked up and said, “Why, aren’t you sweet?”

The stairwell, all asphalt and iron, smelled of galoshes. It felt more secret than the hall, more specially theirs; there was something magical in the rapid multiplication of planes and angles as they descended that lifted the spell on his tongue, so that words came as quickly as his feet pattered on the steps.

“No, I mean it,” he said, “you’re really a beautiful cheerleader. But then you’re beautiful period.”

“I’ve skinny legs.”

“Who told you that?”

“Somebody.”

“Well, *he* wasn’t very sweet.”

“No.”

“Why do you hate this poor old school?”

“Now, Billy. You know you don’t care about this junky place any more than I do.”

“I love it. It breaks my heart to hear you say you want to get out, because then I’ll never see you again.”

“You don’t care, do you?”

“Why, sure I care; you *know*”—their feet stopped; they had reached bottom, the first-floor landing, two brass-barred doors and a grimy radiator—“I’ve always li-loved you.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do too. It’s ridiculous but there it is. I wanted to tell you today and now I have.”

He expected her to laugh and go out the door, but instead she showed an unforeseeable willingness to discuss this awkward matter. He should have realized before this that women enjoy being talked to. “It’s a very silly thing to say,” she asserted tentatively.

“I don’t see why,” he said, fairly bold now that he couldn’t seem more ridiculous, and yet picking his words with a certain strategic care. “It’s not *that* silly to love somebody, I mean what the hell. Probably what’s silly is not to do anything about it for umpteen years, but, then, I never had an opportunity, I thought.”

He set his books down on the radiator and she set hers down beside his. “What kind of opportunity were you waiting for?”

“Well, see, that’s it; I didn’t know.” He wished, in a way, she would go out the door. But she had propped herself against the wall and plainly awaited more conversation. “Yuh-you were such a queen and I was such a nothing and I just didn’t really want to presume.” It wasn’t very interesting; it puzzled him that she seemed to be interested. Her face had grown quite stern, her mouth small and thoughtful, and he made a gesture with his hands intended to release her from the bother of thinking about it. After all, it was just a disposition of his heart, nothing permanent or expensive; perhaps it was just his mother’s idea anyway. Half in impatience to close the account, he asked, “Will you marry me?”

“You don’t want to marry me,” she said. “You’re going to go on and be somebody.”

He blushed in pleasure; is this how she saw him, is this how they all saw him; as nothing now, but in time somebody? Had his hopes always been obvious? He dissembled, saying, “No, I’m not. But anyway, you’re great now. You’re so pretty, Mary.”

“Oh, Billy,” she said, “if you were me for just one day you’d hate it.”

She said this rather blankly, watching his eyes; he wished her voice had shown more misery. In his world of closed surfaces a panel, carelessly pushed, had opened, and he hung in this openness paralyzed, unable to think what to say. Nothing he could think of quite fit the abruptly immense context. The radiator cleared its throat. Its heat made, in the intimate volume just this side of the doors on whose windows the snow beat limply, a provocative snugness. He supposed he should try to kiss her, and stepped forward, his hands lifting toward her shoulders. Mary sidestepped between him and the radiator and put the scarf back on. She lifted the cloth like a broad plaid halo above her head and then wrapped it around her chin and knotted it so she looked, in her red galoshes and bulky coat, like a peasant woman in a movie about Europe. With her hair swathed, her face seemed pale and chunky, and when she recradled the books in her arms her back bent humbly. “It’s too hot in here,” she said. “I’ve got to wait for somebody.” The disconnectedness of the two statements seemed natural in the fragmented atmosphere his stops and starts had produced. She bucked the brass bar with her shoulder and the door slammed open; he followed her into the weather.

“For the person who thinks your legs are too skinny?”

“Could be, Mip.” As she looked up at him a snowflake caught on the lashes of one eye. She jerkily rubbed that cheek on the shoulder of her coat and stamped a foot, splashing slush. Cold water gathered on the back of his thin shirt. He put his hands in his pockets and pressed his arms against his sides to keep from shivering.

“Thuh-then you wo-won’t marry me?” His instinct told him the only way back was by going forward, ridiculously.

“We don’t know each other,” she said.

“My God,” he said. “Why not? I’ve known you since kindergarten.”

“What do you know about me?”

This awful seriousness of hers; he must dissolve it. “That you’re not a virgin.” But instead of making her laugh this made her face go dead and turned it away. Like beginning to kiss her, it was a mistake. In part, he felt grateful for his mistakes; they were like loyal friends who are nevertheless embarrassing. “What do you know about *me?*” he asked, setting himself up for a finishing insult but dreading it. He hated the stiff feel of his smile between his cheeks; he glimpsed, as if the snow were a mirror, how hateful he looked.

“That you’re basically very nice.”

Her reply blinded him to his physical discomfort, set him burning with regret. “Listen,” he said, “I did love you. Let’s at least get that straight.”

“You never loved anybody, Billy,” she said. “You don’t know what it is.”

“O.K.,” he said. “Pardon me.”

“You’re excused.”

“You better wait in the school,” he told her. “He’s-eez-eez going to be a long time.”

She didn’t answer and walked a little distance, along the slack cable that divided the parking lot from the softball field. One bicycle, rusted as if it had been there for years, leaned in the rack, its fenders supporting crescents of white.

The warmth inside the door felt heavy. William picked up his books and ran his pencil across the black ribs of the radiator before going down the stairs to his locker in the annex basement. The shadows were thick at the foot of the steps; suddenly it felt late, he must hurry and get home. He was seized by the irrational fear that the school authorities were going to lock him in. The cloistered odors of paper, sweat, and, from the woodshop at the far end of the basement hall, sawdust no longer flattered him; the tall green double lockers appeared to study him critically through the three air slits near their tops. When he opened his locker, and put his books on his shelf, below Marvin Wolf’s, and removed his coat from his hook, his self seemed to crawl into the long dark space thus made vacant, the humiliated, ugly, educable self. In answer to a flick of his large hand the steel door weightlessly floated shut, and through the length of his body he felt so clean and free he smiled. Between now and the happy future predicted for him he had nothing, almost literally nothing, to do.