# Home

# John Updike

FIRST, THE BOAT TRIP HOME: a downpour in Liverpool, and on the wharf two girls (harlots?) singing “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree” under a single raincoat held over their heads like a canopy, everyone else huddling beneath the eaves of the warehouses, but these girls coming right down to the edge of the concrete wharf, singing, in effect to the whole ocean liner but more particularly to some person or persons (a pair of sailor lovers?) under the tourist deck. And then Cobh in damp golden sunlight, and an American girl from Virginia coming out on the pilot boat in tight toreador pants and with the Modern Library *Ulysses* ostentatiously under her arm. And then the days of the flawless circular horizon: blackjack with the Rhodes Scholars, and deck tennis with the Fulbrights, and eleven-o’clock bouillon, and the waves folding under by the prow, and the wake wandering behind them like a lime-colored highway. Robert had determined to be not disappointed by the Statue of Liberty, to submit to her cliché, but she disappointed him by being genuinely awesome, in the morning mist of the harbor, with a catch in her green body as if she had just thought to raise the torch, or at least to raise it so high. His baby in her bunting wriggled on his shoulder, and the other young Americans crowded the rail, and he felt obstructed from absorbing a classic effect, the queen of insignia, the trademark supreme. So it was he, prepared to condescend, who was unequal to the occasion.

And then America. Just the raggle-taggle of traffic and taxis that collects at the west end of the Forties when a liner comes in, but his, his fatherland. In the year past, the sight of one of these big grimacing cars shouldering its way through the Oxford lanes had been to him a breathing flag, a bugle blown across a field of grain, and here they were, enough of them to create a traffic jam, honking and glaring at each other in the tropical-seeming heat, bunched like grapes and as blatantly colored as birds of paradise. They were outrageous, but made sense; they fitted his eyes. Already England seemed a remote, gray apparition. It seemed three years and not three months since he had sat alone in the two-and-six seats of the American-style cinema in Oxford and cried. Joanne had just had the baby. She slept a tuppenny bus ride away, in a hospital bed, to whose foot was attached a basket containing Corinne. All the mothers in the ward seemed to have something wrong with them. They were Irish or American, unwed or unwell. One garrulous crone, tubercular, was frequently milked by a sputtering machine. In the bed beside Joanne, a young colleen wept all day long because her immigrating husband had not yet found work. In visiting hours he nested his snub face on the sheets beside her and they cried together. Joanne had cried when they told her that in this country healthy women were asked to have their babies at home; their home was a dank basement flat in which they leaped from one shin-roasting island of heat to another. She had burst into tears, right there at the head of the queue, and the welfare state had clasped her to its drab and ample bosom. They gave her coupons to trade for powdered orange juice. They wrapped the newborn baby in swaddling bands. All he could see of Corinne was her head, a bright-red ball, blazing with his blood. It was all very strange. At sunset a parson came into the ward and led an Anglican service that made the mothers weep. Then the husbands came, carrying little bags of fruit and candy bars. Bunched in the waiting room, they could see their wives primping in their cranked-up beds. Then the seven-o’clock bells rang, now here, now there, all over the city. When the eight-o’clock bells rang, Joanne gave Robert a passionate kiss, hard with panic yet soft with the wish to sleep. She slept, and a mile away he watched a Doris Day movie about that mythical Midwestern town that Hollywood keeps somewhere among its sets. The houses were white, the porches deep, the lawns green, the sidewalks swept, the maples dark and blowzy against the streetlights. Doris Day’s upper lip lifted in just that apprehensive but spunky small-town way; her voice cracked. Abruptly, right there in the midst of the rustling Kit Kat bars and stunted shopgirl doxies and young British toughs in their sinister liveries of black, he discovered himself, to his amazement and delight, crying, crying hot honest tears for his lost home.

And then the gritty snarl of customs, and watching the baggage slide piece by piece down the roller ramp, and trying to soothe the fussy infant, who had never known such heat. The badged cherubim guarding the gate to the nation allowed him to pass through and give the child to the grandparents and great-aunts and cousins that waited on the other side. His mother rose and kissed him on the cheek, and with an averted glance his father shook his hand, and his parents-in-law mimicked them, and the other relatives made appropriate motions of affection, and then they all wandered about the dismal, echoing waiting room in the desperate little circles of delay. While he had been abroad, his mother’s letters—graceful, witty, informative, cheerful—had been his main link with home, but now that he saw his parents in the flesh, it was his father who interested him. There had been nothing like him in Europe. Old, sadly old—he had had all sixteen remaining teeth pulled while Robert was away, and his face seemed jaundiced with pain and his false teeth huge and square—he still stood perfectly erect, like a child that has just learned to stand, his hands held limply, forward from his body, at the level of his belt. Unwilling, or unable, to look long at his only son or his infant granddaughter, he explored the waiting room, studying the water fountain, and a poster for Manischewitz wine, and the buttons on the coat of a colored porter, as if each might contain the clue to something he had lost. Though for thirty years a public-school teacher, he still believed in education. Now he engaged the porter in conversation, gesturing sadly with his hands, asking questions, questions that Robert could not hear but that he knew from experience could be about anything—the tonnage of great ships, the popularity of Manischewitz wine, the mechanics of unloading luggage. The receipt of any information made his father for a brief moment less mournful. The porter looked up, puzzled and wary at first, and then, the way it usually went, became flattered and voluble. People in passing, for all their haste, turned their heads to stare at the strange duet of the tall, yellow-faced, stubbornly nodding man in rolled-up shirtsleeves and the dissertating little Negro. The porter fetched one of his colleagues over to confirm a point. There was much waving of hands, and their voices began to grow loud. Robert’s face smarted with the familiar prickles of embarrassment. His father was always so conspicuous. He was so tall that he had been chosen, on the occasion of another return from Europe, to be Uncle Sam and lead their town’s Victory Parade in the autumn of 1945.

At last he rejoined the rest of the family and announced, “That was a very interesting man. He said these signs all around saying ‘No Tipping’ are strictly baloney. He said his union has been fighting for years to get them taken down.” He offered this news with a mild air of hope, forming the words hurriedly around his unaccustomed false teeth. Robert made an exasperated noise and turned his back. There. Not in the country one hour and already he had been rude to his father. He returned to the other side of the gate and completed the formalities.

They maneuvered the baggage into the trunk of his father’s brown ’49 Plymouth. The little car looked dusty and vulnerable amid the vibrant taxis. A young blond cop came over to protest its illegal position at the curb and ended, so seductive was the appeal of his father’s stoic bewilderment, by helping them lift the huge old-fashioned trunk—Robert’s mother’s at college—into place among the broken jacks and knots of rope and unravelling wheels of basketball tickets his father carried around. The trunk stuck out over the bumper. They tied the door of the car trunk down with frayed ropes. His father asked the policeman how many taxicabs there were in Manhattan and if it was true, as he had read, that the drivers had been robbed so often they wouldn’t go into Harlem at night any more. Their discussion continued throughout the farewells. Robert’s aunt, with a kiss that smelled of Kool cigarettes and starched linen, went off to catch the train to Stamford. His cousin, her son, walked away under the pillars of the West Side Highway; he lived on West Twelfth Street and worked as an animator for television commercials. His wife’s parents herded their little flock of kin toward the parking lot, redeemed their scarlet Volvo, and began the long haul to Boston. Mother got into the front seat of the Plymouth. Robert and Joanne and Corinne arranged themselves in the back. Minutes passed; then his father and the policeman parted, and his father got in behind the wheel. “That was very interesting,” he said. “He said ninety-nine out of a hundred Puerto Ricans are honest.” With a doleful thump of the clutch, they headed for Pennsylvania.

Robert had a job teaching—his father’s harness, but a higher grade of leather—to ex-debutantes at a genteel college on the Hudson. It would begin in September. This was July. For the interval, he and Joanne were to sponge off their parents. His got them first. He had looked forward to this month; it would be the longest he would have been in Pennsylvania with his wife, and he had a memory of something he had wanted to describe, to explain, to her about his home. But exactly what that was, he had forgotten. His parents lived in a small town fifty miles west of Philadelphia, in a county settled by German immigrants a century and a half ago. His mother had been born in the county, on a farm, and felt involved with the land but estranged from its people. His father had come from Elizabeth, New Jersey, and groped after people, but saw no comfort in land. Whereas Robert, who had been born and raised in the small town, where people and land formed a patchwork, thought he loved both; yet, ever since he could remember, he had been planning to escape. The air had seemed too dense, too full of pollen and morality, and apt to choke him. He had made that escape. It had seemed necessary. But it had left him feeling hollow, fragile, transparent—a vial waiting to be filled with tears by the next Doris Day movie. Coming home filled him with strength, a thicker liquid. But each time less full; he sensed this. Both he and the land were altering. The container was narrowing; the thing contained was becoming diluted. In the year past, his mother’s letters had often seemed enigmatic and full of pale, foreign matter. So it was with a sense of guilty urgency that he silently willed the car forward, as if the heart of his homeland might give out before he reached it.

His father said, “That cop told me he had studied to be a television repairman but couldn’t get any business so he became a cop. He said the field’s gotten crowded as hell in the last five years.”

“Daddy, hush,” said the new grandmother. “The baby wants to go to sleep.”

Corinne had been terrorized by the tooting of the tugboats; being passed from arms to arms had sustained her upset. Now she lay on the floor of the car in a cream-colored Carry-Cot they had bought in England. Just looking at its nickel studs and braces made Robert remember the carriage shop on the Cowley Road, with its bright-black rows of stately prams built as if for a lifetime; and indeed the English did wheel their children around until they were immense. Ah, the dear, rosy English: he began, with a soft reversal of blood, to feel homesick for them. Could he never rest?

They undressed Corinne of her woolen clothes and she lay in a diaper, pink with heat, kicking her legs and whimpering. Then the whorls of her face slumped sideways, her star-shaped hands stopped fidgeting, and she fell asleep on the jiggling bosom of the highway. “Honestly, Joanne,” Robert’s mother said, “I’ve never seen such a perfect baby. And I’m not just being a mother-in-law when I say that.” Her protest was abrasive on several sides; Robert resisted the implication that the baby had been solely Joanne’s doing.

“I like her bellybutton,” he asserted.

“It’s a masterpiece,” his mother said, and he felt, in a queer way, confirmed. But even then: the baby’s beauty, like all beauty, was self-enclosed, and led nowhere. Their talk stayed shy and tentative. There was gossip between Robert and his parents that his wife could not share; and a growing body of allusions between himself and Joanne to which his parents were foreigners. The widening range and importance of these allusions, which could not by any effort of politeness be completely suppressed, seemed to dwindle and mock his relation with his parents.

He had always, even at college age, smoked *sub rosa*, out of the house, where the sight would not offend his mother. It had been like sex: forgivable but unsightly. But now, as Joanne burned Player after Player in her nervousness at his father’s eccentric and preoccupied driving, Robert could not, as her husband and as a man, abstain; and anyway, of the two old sins it had been the lesser, and the fruit of the worse had just been praised. At the scratch of his match, his mother turned her head and looked at him levelly. To her credit, there was not a tremor of reproach. Yet after that level look he was painfully conscious of the smoke that drifted forward and encircled her head, and of the patient way she kept brushing it from her face with her hand. Her hand was freckled on the back and her wedding ring cut deeply into the flesh of the third finger, giving her quietest gesture a passive, wounded eloquence.

It seemed a point scored for her side when Joanne, panicked that her father-in-law would bungle the turnoff for the Pulaski Skyway, shattered the tip of her cigarette against the back of the seat and a live ash fell on the baby’s belly. It went unnoticed for a second, until Corinne screamed; then they all saw it, a little flea of fire glowing beside the perfect navel. Joanne jumped, and squealed with guilt, and flapped her hands and stamped her feet and hugged the baby against her, but the evidence could not be destroyed: a brown dot of char on the globe of immaculate skin. Corinne continued her screams, splicing them with shrill hard gasps of intake, while everyone rummaged through purses and pockets for Vaseline, butter, toothpaste—anything for an unguent. Mother had a tiny bottle of toilet water given her in a department store; Joanne dabbed some of this on, and in time Corinne, shaken by more and more widely spaced spasms of sobbing, mercifully dragged her injury with her into the burrow of sleep.

The incident was so like the incident of the penny that Robert had to tell them about it. On the boat, he had gone down to their cabin, where Corinne was sleeping, to get his wallet from his other coat. The coat was hanging on a hook over her crib. The tourist cabins on these big liners, he explained, are terribly cramped—everything on top of everything else.

His father nodded, swallowing a fact. “They don’t give you much space, huh?”

“They *can’t*,” Robert told him. “Anyway, in my hurry or something, when I took out the wallet I flipped an English penny out with it and it flew and hit Corinne right in the center of her forehead.”

“Why, Robert!” his mother said.

“Oh, it was awful. She cried for an hour. Much longer than just now, with the spark.”

“She must be getting used to our dropping things on her,” Joanne said.

With a possibly pointed tact, his mother declined to agree with this suggestion, and expressed politely exaggerated interest in the English penny they showed her. Why, it *is* heavy! And is this the *smallest* denomination? They eagerly showed her other British coins. But there were elements in the story that had been suppressed: they had needed his wallet because they had used up all their change in an uproarious orgy of blackjack and beer. And from Joanne, even, Robert had this secret: the reason for his haste in retrieving the wallet was his hurry to get back to the invigorating company of the flashy girl from Virginia who had boarded the boat at Cobh. In the dim cabin lit by a blue bulb and warmed by his overheated body, the weird flight of the penny had seemed a judgment.

So the accident, and the anecdote, reinforced the constraint. The dear roadside ice-cream stands, the beloved white frame houses, the fervently stocked and intimately cool drugstores unfurled behind car windows smeared with sullen implications of guilt, disappointment, apology, and lost time. Robert looked to his parents to break the spell. Married, employed, in a narrow way learned, himself a father, he was still childish enough to expect his parents to pierce the many little mysteries that had been deposited between them. He blamed them for failing to do it. In their infinite power they had only to stretch out a hand. Spitefully he began to look forward to the month in Boston they would spend with Joanne’s parents.

They came west across New Jersey, crossed the Delaware where Washington had once crossed it, and on a southwesterly curve penetrated into Pennsylvania. The towns along the route changed from the flat, wooden New Jersey sort into a stiffer, more Teutonic type, braced against hills with stone and brick, laid out stubbornly on the plan of a grid, though this dogmatism compelled extensive sustaining walls that rose and fell with the land, damming brief domed lawns crowned with narrow brick houses whose basement windows were higher than the top of their car. The brutal sun passed noon; the trunk lid rattled and bobbed as the ropes loosened. They came to the border of the twenty square miles that Robert knew well. In this town he had gone each fall to a football game, and in this one he had attended a fair where the girls in the tents danced wearing nothing but high-heeled shoes.

A web began to clog Robert’s throat. He sneezed. “Poor Bobby,” his mother said. “I bet he hasn’t had hay fever since the last time he was home.”

“I didn’t know he got hay fever,” Joanne said.

“Oh, terribly,” his mother said. “When he was a little boy, it used to break my heart. With his sinuses, he really shouldn’t smoke.”

They all swayed; a car at the curb had unexpectedly nosed out into their path. Robert’s father, without touching the brake, swung around it; it was a long green car, glitteringly new, and the face at the driver’s window, suspended for a moment on the wave of their swerve, was startled and pink. Robert noticed this dully. His eyes were watering allergically. They drove on, and a half-mile passed before the swelling honking behind them dawned on him as aimed at them.

The green car was speeding to catch them; it rode a few yards behind their bumper while the driver leaned on the horn. Robert turned and through the rear window read, between the triple headlights hooded under twirled eyebrows of metal, the tall letters OLDSMOBILE embodied in the grille. The car surged into the next lane and slowed to their speed; its streamlined sweepback windshield gave it the look of losing its hat. The little pink driver screamed over through the passenger’s window. The man’s middle-aged wife, as if she were often a partner in this performance, expertly pulled back her head to let his words fly past, but they were indistinguishable in the rush of wind and whirling rubber.

Daddy turned to Mother; he was squinting in pain. “What’s he saying, Julia? I can’t hear what he’s saying.” He still looked to his wife as his interpreter in this region, though he had lived here more than thirty years.

“He’s saying he’s an angry man,” Mother said.

Robert, his brain fogged by the gathering gasps of a sneeze, stamped on the floor, to make their car travel faster and out-race their assailant. But his father slowed and braked to a stop.

The Olds was taken by surprise, and travelled a good distance beyond them before it, too, pulled over to the side of the road. They were outside the town; trim farmland, hazy with pollen, undulated in the heat on either side of the highway. The car up ahead spat out its driver. At a fat little trot a short perspiring man jogged back along the gravel shoulder toward them. He wore a flowered Hawaiian shirt, and words were spilling from his mouth. The motor of the old Plymouth, too hot to idle after hours of steady running, throbbed and stalled. The man’s head arrived at the side window; he had a square skull, with ridges of cartilage above the neat white ears, and his skin, flushed and puckered as it was by raving, gave an impression of translucent delicacy, like the skin on a sausage. Even before the man regained his breath to speak, Robert recognized him as a prime specimen of the breed that the outside world fondly calls the Pennsylvania Dutch. And then, in the first shrill cascade of outrage, the juicy *ch*’s and misplaced *w*’s of the accent seemed visually distinct, like letters stamped on shattered crates sliding down a waterfall. As the wild voice lowered and slowed, whole strings of obscenities were explicit. Consecutive sentences could be understood. “You hat no right to cut me off like that. Youff no right to go through town like that.”

Robert’s father, whose hearing had deteriorated along with his teeth, made no answer; this refusal whipped the little stout man into a new spin of fury: his skin shining as if to burst, he thrust his face into their window; he shut his eyes and his eyelids swelled; the wings of his nostrils whitened with pressure. His voice broke, as if frightened of itself, and he turned his back and walked a step away. His movements in the brilliant air seemed managed against a huge and impelling rigidity.

Robert’s father mildly called after him, “I’m trying to understand you, mister, but I can’t catch your meaning. I can’t get your point.”

This gave the top another turn, more furious still, but of shorter duration. Mother brushed some smoke from her face, relieving a long paralysis. The baby whimpered, and Joanne moved to the edge of the seat, trying to confront the source of the disturbance. Perhaps these motions from the women stirred feelings of guilt in the Dutchman; he released, like an ancillary legal argument, another spasm of lavatory-wall words, and his hands did a galvanized dance among the flowers of his shirt, and he actually, like a dervish, whirled completely around. Mournfully Robert’s father gazed into the vortex, the skin of his face going increasingly yellow, as if with repeated extractions. In profile his lips clamped stubbornly over his clumsy new teeth, and his eye was a perfect diamond of undeviating interest. This attentiveness dragged at the Dutchman’s indignant momentum. The aggrieved and obscene voice, which in the strange acoustics of the noon seemed to be echoing off the baking blue sky above them all, halted with a scratch of friction.

As if the spark had just struck her belly, Corinne began to scream. Joanne crouched down and shouted toward the front window, “You’ve woken up the baby!”

Robert’s legs ached, and, partly to stretch them, partly to show some fight, he opened his door and got out. He felt his slender height, encased in his pin-striped English suit, unfold like an elegant and surprising weapon. The enemy’s beaded forehead puckered doubtfully. “Whawereya trine to pull aat in front of us for?” Robert asked him in the slouching accents of home. His voice, stoppered by hay fever and dwindled by the blatant sunlight, seemed less his own than that of an old acquaintance.

His father opened his door and got out also. At the revelation of this even greater, more massive height, the Dutchman spat on the asphalt, taking care not to hit any shoes. Still working against that invisible resistance in the air, he jerkily pivoted and began to strut toward his car.

“No, wait a minute, mister,” Robert’s father called, and began to stride after him. The pink face, abruptly drained of fury, flashed above the soaked shoulder of the Hawaiian shirt. The Dutchman went into his trot. Robert’s father, in his anxiety at seeing a conversation broken off, gave chase; his lengthening stride lifted his body off the ground with an awesome, floating slow motion. Under the shimmer of the road his shadow seemed to be falling away from his feet. His voice drifted faintly down the glaring highway. “Wait a minute, mister. I want to ask you something.” As the perspective closed the distance between them, the Dutchman’s legs twittered like a pinioned insect’s, but this was an illusion; he was not caught. He arrived at the door of his Oldsmobile, judged he had time to utter one more curse, uttered it, and dodged into the glistening green shell. Robert’s father arrived at the bumper as the car pulled out. The tense wrinkles on the back of his shirt implied an urge to hurl himself upon the fleeing metal. Then the wrinkles relaxed as he straightened his shoulders.

Erect with frustration, arms swinging, he marched down the side of the road just as, fifteen years before, in spats and a top hat made of cardboard, he had marched at the head of that parade.

Inside the car, Joanne was jiggling the baby and beaming. “That was wonderful,” she said.

With an effort of contraction Daddy shrank into his place behind the steering wheel. He started the car and turned his big head sadly to tell her, “No. That man had something to say to me and I wanted to hear what it was. If I did something wrong, I want to know about it. But the bastard wouldn’t talk sense. Like everybody else in this county—I can’t understand them. They’re Julia’s people.”

“I think he thought we were Gypsies,” Mother said. “On account of the old trunk in the back. Also, the lid was up and he couldn’t see our Pennsylvania license plate. They’re very anxious, you know, to keep the ‘impure races’ out of this section. Once the poor fellow heard us talk, he was satisfied, and I think embarrassed.”

“He seemed awfully mad about nothing,” Joanne said.

Mother’s voice quickened, became fluid. “Well, that’s how they *are*, Joanne. The people in this part of the country are just mad all the time. God gave them these beautiful valleys and they’re hopping mad. I don’t know why. I think there’s too much starch in their diet.” Her dietary theories were close to her heart; her touching on them conferred on Joanne a daughter’s status.

Robert called forward, “Daddy, I don’t think he really had any information to share.” He spoke partly to hear his old voice again, partly to compete for attention with his newly created sibling, and partly in a vain hope of gathering to himself some of the glory his father now and then won in the course of his baffled quest for enlightenment. Primarily, Robert spoke to show his wife how accustomed he was to such scenes, how often such triumphant catastrophes had entered his life at home, so that he could be quite blasé about them. This was not true: he was intensely excited, and grew even more so as in folds of familiarity the land tightened around him.