# The Doctor’s Wife

# John Updike

“SHARKS?” The tip of the doctor’s wife’s freckled nose seemed to sharpen in the sparkling air. Her eyes, momentarily rendered colorless by thought, took up the green of the Caribbean; the plane of the water intersected her throat. “Yes, we have some. Big dark fellows, too.”

Ralph, hanging beside her, squatting on buoyance, straightened up, splashing, and tried to survey the beryl depths around him. His sudden movements rendered even the immediate water opaque. The doctor’s wife’s surprisingly young laughter rang out.

“You Americans,” she said, “so nervy,” and with complacence pushed a little deeper into the sea, floating backward while the water gently bubbled around her mouth. She had a small face, gone freckled and rosy in this climate; her stringy auburn hair had been bleached by daily sea-bathing. “They rarely come in this far,” she said, tilting her face upward and speaking to the sky. “Only in the turtle-killing season, when the blood draws them in. We’re fortunate. Our beaches go out shallowly. Over in St. Martin, now, the offshore water is deep, and they must be careful.”

She turned and, with the casual paddling stroke of a plump woman who floats easily, swam smiling toward him. “A shame,” she said, her voice strained by the effort of curving her throat to keep her lips free, “Vic Johnson is gone. He was a dear soul. The old Anglican vicar.” She pronounced “vicar” rather harshly, perhaps humorously. She stood up beside Ralph and pointed to the horizon. “Now, *he*,” she said, “used to swim far out into the bay, he and his great black dog, Cato. Vic would swim straight out, until he couldn’t move a muscle, and then he would float, and grab Cato’s tail, and the dog would pull him in. Honestly, it was a sight, this fat old Englishman, his white hair streaming, coming in on the tail of a dog. He never gave a thought to sharks. Oh, he’d swim *way* out, until he was just a dot.”

They were waist-deep in the sea, and at a motion from Ralph they walked toward shore together. The calm warm water leaped from their strides. She was small beside him, and her voice piped at his shoulder. “I’m sorry he’s gone,” she said. “He was a lovely old gentleman. He had been here forty years. He loved the island.”

“I can see why he would,” Ralph said. He turned his head to review the crescent of landscape around the beach, as if through his fresh eyes the doctor’s wife could renew—what seemed to him to need renewing—her sense of the island’s beauty. The white beach was empty. The natives used it only as a path. Their homes were set behind the ragged hedge of sea grape that rimmed the sand. Bits of tarpaper, pink-painted cement, corrugated roofing reddened by rust, wooden walls weathered to silver and patched by flattened kerosene tins, shacks on stilts, and unfinished cinder-block shells peeped above the dull, low foliage. There were few flowers. This was January. But the clusters of coconuts nested under the shuffling branches of the palms, and the high small puffy clouds, like the quick clouds of spring in his own climate, suggested that here the season of bloom and the season of harvest were parallel and perpetual: germination and fruition ceaselessly intertwined. There were no mountains in the view. The island was low; when they came in on the airplane, it seemed a two-dimensional twin, or sketch, of St. Martin, which thrust from the sea like a set of Vermont mountaintops. There, the beaches were steep and dangerous; here, they were safe. There, Dutchmen and Frenchmen built bustling hotels and restaurants to entice American dollars; here, strangers rarely came. Here, even the place names were bestowed without enterprise or effort. East End, West End, The Road, The Forest—thus the island was geographically divided. The uninhabited ridge of scrub and coral rubble that formed one side of the bay was named High Hill. The village was called The Bay. The orange cliffs on the other side of the bay were called The Cliffs. During these short winter days the sun set on a diagonal above them and, between six and seven o’clock, touched the sea at the fingertips of the most distant arm of land. Yet, after the sun had drowned, light, itself lazy, lingered among the huts and the oleander bushes. Now it was late afternoon; the tiny tropical sun, not yet swollen to red, patiently poured white brilliance down through the hushed air. The air was as soft, as kind, as the water; there was no hostility in either. The two elements, as Ralph came out of one into the other, seemed tints of a single enveloping benevolence.

“Oh, yes, but not merely that,” the doctor’s wife said. “He loved the people. He built them three churches and, oh, did all manner of good works. We’re talking of Reverend Johnson,” she explained to Eve, who had remained on the beach with the children. “The Anglican padre. He retired last year and went back to England. Sussex, I think.”

“He loved the people?” Eve asked. She had heard. Voices carried well in the air, disturbed, during the day, by only the whispering beat of the surf and infrequent voices calling in English made musical by an unintelligible lilt.

The doctor’s wife dropped down on the sand. “These are my children,” she intoned gruffly. She chased the abrupt parody away with her sharp laughter. “Oh, yes, he loved them. He gave his life to them.” The youthful excitement of her voice and the innocent clarity of her eyes went queerly with her body, which was middle-aged. Her plump legs had gone lumpy and sodden, and her small face was finely wrinkled, each wrinkle accented by a line of white where the pinched skin had evaded the sun. “He didn’t have any children of his own,” she thought to add. “Just this dreadful dog Cato. Such a funny old man. You might have liked him. I’m sure you never see his kind in America.”

“I know we would have liked him,” Eve said. “Hannah often mentions Reverend Johnson.” Hannah was their cook, a woman of over thirty yet as shy and subtle as a girl. Her skin was always shining as if in embarrassment, but she had a jaunty way of crooning hymns to herself in the kitchen. The children, at first timid of her color, adored her, and listened with eyes rounded by delight when she held up a two-tone forefinger and told them to be good. Goodness had never before been presented to them seriously.

Ralph and Eve had not expected a servant. Prepared to rough it on a family vacation, they had picked the most obscure island they could find. But Hannah came with the house; the owner, a svelte widow who had children in Florida, Peru, and Antigua, assumed they would need her. As it turned out, they did. They could never have unravelled alone all the riddles of this novel world. Eve could never have managed the shopping, which was carried on by gossip—invisible voices as liquid as the wind, telling who had just slaughtered a pig, and whose fishing boat had come in with a catch. The village was full of stores; almost every shack at least sold—for disturbingly discrepant prices—American cigarettes smuggled from St. Martin. But even the business hours of the most official store, a cement corridor of shelves attached to the customs office, had proved a mystery the Americans were unable to crack. They always found barred the large green door bearing in wobbly chalk script the ancient announcement “Attention Members! Attention Friends! This Store will be CLOSED Thursday afternoon.”

“Oh, Hannah. She’s a good girl,” the doctor’s wife said, and rolled over on her stomach. The corrugated backs of her thighs were frosted with sand like wet sugar.

“She is, you know,” Eve said. “She’s lovely. I think they’re all lovely. They’ve all been lovely to us.” Such insistence was unlike his wife. Ralph wondered what was between the two women, who had just met a day ago. “I can see why Reverend Johnson loved the people,” Eve added in a deliberate, though cautiously soft, voice. “The people” were all around them; their huts came down to the edge of the sand, and, windows shuttered, the patched walls seemed to be listening.

The doctor’s wife rolled over again and returned to a sitting position. What was making her so restless?

“Yes,” she said, and an especially heavy curl of surf foamed up the white slope and soaked in just short of their feet. The sand was porous; innumerable punctures dotted it, the breathing holes of crabs. The doctor’s wife’s eyes fixed on the horizon and became, from the side, colorless lenses. Her nose in profile turned sharp. “They’re simple souls,” she said.

The doctor’s wife was a queen here. She was the only fully white woman resident on the island. When the rare British official and the rarer, fantastically minor member of royalty came to grace this most remote and docile scrap of empire with a visit, she was the hostess. When she roared along the dirt roads in her spattered English Ford—its muffler had long ago rotted away—the older natives touched their foreheads ironically and the children flapped their arms in her wake of dust. When she and the doctor condescended to call upon the American family staying three weeks in The Bay, Hannah had trembled with pride and broken a cup in the kitchen. The doctor was a slight, rapid-voiced man with a witty air of failure. His fingertips were dyed deep yellow by smuggled cigarettes. He preferred Camels, but Chesterfields were all that were coming through now. Camels had more scratch in them. He had never seen a filtered cigarette. He and his wife had been ten years in the tropics—B.G., Trinidad, Barbados, now this. He had some vague scheme of getting to America and making a fortune and retiring to a Yorkshire village. He was off for the day to St. Martin.

“In America, now,” the doctor’s wife said, vehemently brushing sand from her knees, “are the coloreds well cared for?”

“How do you mean?” Eve asked.

“Are they well off?”

“Not really,” Ralph said, because he sensed that it would be better if he, rather than Eve, answered. “In some parts better than others. In the South, of course, they’re openly discriminated against; in the North they by and large have to live in the city slums but at least they have full legal rights.”

“Oh, dear,” the doctor’s wife said. “It is a problem, isn’t it?”

Eve’s face flashed up from studying a shell. “Whose problem?” she asked. She was a graduate of one of those female colleges where only a member of a racial minority or a physically handicapped person is ever elected class president. News from South Africa made her voice thrash, and she was for anyone—Castro, Ben-Gurion, Martin Luther King—who in her mind represented an oppressed race.

The doctor’s wife returned her gaze to the horizon, and Ralph wondered if they had been rude. In the woman’s pointed profile there was a certain purposely silent thrust. But, the hostess, she relented and tried to make the conversation go again. She turned her head, shading her eyes with a quick hand and exposing her neat white teeth in a tense smile. “The schools,” she said. “Can they go to your schools?”

“Of course,” Ralph said swiftly, at the same time realizing that for her there was no “of course” to it. She knew nothing about his country. He felt firmer, having gauged her ignorance, and having moved to the hard ground of information. “Nobody denies them schools. In the South the schools are segregated. But in the North, and the West, and so on, there’s no problem.” He hunched his shoulders, feeling at his back Eve’s disapproval of his saying “problem.”

“But”—the doctor’s wife’s freckles gathered under her eyes as she squinted into the heart of the issue—“would *your* children go to school with them?”

“Sure. Good heavens. Why not?” He was relieved to clear this up, to lock this door. He hoped the doctor’s wife would now turn away and talk of something else.

She sighed. “Of course, you in America have lived with the problem so long. In England, now, they’re just waking up; the blacks are *pouring* into London.”

A wave, pushed by one behind it, slid so far up the slant of sand that their feet were unexpectedly soaked. For a few seconds their ankles glittered in rippling sleeves of retreating water. Eve said slowly, “You talk as if they had asked to be made slaves and brought here.”

“Mommy, look! Mommy, look!” Kate’s voice, mingling with Larry’s babyish yips of excitement, came from far down the beach. Their little silhouettes were jiggling around something dark at their feet, and out of the sea grape an old woman in a kerchief and a young man with a naked chest had emerged to watch them, amused to see what amused these exotic children. Eve rose, casting down, for Ralph to see, a startled and indignant look at the doctor’s wife’s body, as if it were an offensive piece of rubbish washed up on the pure sands of her mind.

As Eve walked away, the doctor’s wife said, “Doesn’t she take a tan beautifully?”

“Yes, she always does. She’s part French.” With his wife out of earshot, Ralph relaxed into the sand. Mediating between the two women had demanded an exhausting equilibrium. He resigned himself to listening; he knew the doctor’s wife’s tongue would be loosened. The presence of another white queen inhibited her, diluted her authority.

“Do you want to hear a frightening story?”

“Sure.” He acquiesced uneasily. The attention of the houses behind them seemed to grow more intense. He felt that he and his family were liked in the village; the doctor’s wife, driving down from the center of the island to enjoy their beach, assumed an incriminating alliance which he did not wish to exist. For, when the sun went down, she would go home, leaving them alone in the village with the night and its noises. Their tilly lamps hissed; black bugs droned into the lamps and fell crackling onto the table. Far up the road a boy practiced on his lonely steel drum, and next door, in an unpainted cabin that was never unshuttered, a woman wailed and a man infrequently growled a brief, dangerous complaint.

“When Vic Johnson left,” the doctor’s wife said, lowering her voice and sinking back on her elbow, to bring her face closer to Ralph’s, “they had a party to greet the new parson, a very nice young colored boy from St. Kitts. *Very* nice, I must say, and they say very intelligent, though I haven’t heard him preach. Well, the Warden—you haven’t met him, and I dare say you won’t, a big smooth Jamaican, takes himself, oh, *ever* so seriously—the Warden makes this little speech. He of course mentions Vic, forty years and so on, but right at the end he says that he knows we will not miss Reverend Johnson, because the new vicar is such a fine young man, comes to us with such an excellent record of study, and the rest of it, and furthermore, *furthermore*, what makes us especially happy and proud, he is one of us. Imagine! One of us! Of course, the young parson was embarrassed to death. It made me so mad I would have jumped up and left if the doctor hadn’t held my hand. *One of us!* Vic had given his life to these people.”

Her voice had become shrill; Ralph spoke in the hope of restraining it. “It seems unnecessary to spell out, but natural,” he said.

“I don’t see anything natural about it. Unnatural, in my book. Unnatural, childish ingratitude. You just don’t know how unnatural these people are. If you could see one-tenth of the antics, and then the selfishness, the doctor puts up with. At two in the morning, ‘Doctor, Doctor, come save my child,’ and then, a week later, when he tries to collect his poor little dollar or two, they don’t *remember*. They don’t remember at all. And if he insists—‘The white people are stealing our money.’ Oh. I hate them. God forgive me, I’ve come to hate them. They’re *not* natural. They’re not fully human.” Seeing his hand begin a protesting movement, she added, “And for that matter, do you know what they say about you and your wife?” It was as if a shadow cruising through her words now made its lunge.

“No. Do they say something?”

“This is just to show how malicious they are. They say your wife has a touch of the brush.” It took Ralph a moment to expand “brush” into “tar brush.” He laughed; what else?

The doctor’s wife laughed, too; but under the blond eyebrows her blue eyes, the pupils pinpricks in the sun, were fixed on his face. She expected his face to crack and the truth to escape. “You see how dark she is,” she explained. “How tan.” He watched her tongue tick as she suspensefully pronounced the last two words.

Blood rushed through his body; the wound was confused; his anger entangled him with his attacker. He was supplying an absurd assault with teeth out of himself. “She’s always taken a good tan.”

“And you see,” the doctor’s wife went on, still not unpinning her eyes from his face, “that’s why they say you came here. No tourists come here, least of all with children. They say your wife’s being part Negro has kept you out of the hotels on the better islands.”

He felt certain that this ingenious argument was wholly her own. “We came here because it was cheap,” he said.

“Of *course*,” she said, “of *course*. But they can’t believe that. They believe, you see, that all Americans are *rich*.” Which was just what, Ralph suspected, she and the doctor believed.

He stood up, wet sand collapsing from his legs. In an effort to control his excitement, he threw several unrelated laughs, as if out of a renewed apprehension of absurdity, into the air. He looked down at the woman and said, “Well, that explains why they seem to like her better than me.”

The doctor’s wife, having strained her neck to squint up at him, collapsed the rest of the way. She pillowed her head with one arm and threw the other over her eyes. Without her eyes her lips seemed vague and numb. “Oh, no,” she said. “They hate her for getting away with it.”

His laughter this time was totally vacant. “I think I’ll go in again,” he said. “Before the sun fades.”

“It won’t fade,” was the faint, withdrawing answer.

From the safety of the water he watched his tan wife herd his two pale, burned children up the beach, toward the doctor’s wife. He had an urge to shout a warning, then smiled, imagining the amused incredulity that would greet this story when they were back home, at a cocktail party, secure among their own. Abruptly, he felt guilty in relation to his wife. He had betrayed her; his defensiveness had been unworthy of her. She would have wanted him to say something like yes, her great-grandfather picked cotton in Alabama, in America these things are taken for granted, we have no problem. But he saw, like something living glimpsed in a liquid volume, that his imaginary scenarios depended upon, could only live within, a vast unconscious white pride; he and the doctor’s wife were in this together. There was no bottom to his guilt, its intricacy was as dense as a liquid mass. He moved backward in the ocean, touching the ribbed bottom with his toes, until the water wrapped around his throat. Something—seaweed or the pulse of a current—touched Ralph’s calf. He thrashed, and peered down, but saw nothing. He was afraid of the sharks, and he was afraid of the doctor’s wife, so he hung there between them, bleeding shame.