# The Afterlife

# John Updike

The Billingses, so settled in their ways, found in their fifties that their friends were doing sudden, surprising things. Mitch Lothrop, whom Carter and Jane had always rather poked fun at as stuffy, ran off with a young Jamaican physical therapist, and Augustina, who had seemed such a mouse all those years—obsessed with her garden and her children’s educations—took it rather raucously in stride, buying herself a new wardrobe of broad-shouldered dresses, putting a prodigiously expensive new slate roof on the Weston house, and having in as a new companion another woman, a frilly little blue-eyed person who worked in Boston as a psychologist for the Department of Social Services. Ken McEvoy, on the other hand, was one day revealed in the newspapers as an embezzler who over the course of twenty years had stolen between two and five million from his brokerage firm; nobody, including the IRS, knew exactly how much. The investigation had evidently been going on for ages, during which time Ken and Molly had been showing up at cocktail parties and dinner parties and zoning hearings with not a hair out of place, smiling and looking as handsome a couple as ever. Even now, with the indictment in the paper and the plea-bargaining stage under way, they continued to appear at gatherings, Ken quite hilarious and open about it all and basking at the center of attention; he had always seemed rather stiff and shy before. What had he done with all the money? It was true they had two foreign cars, and a place on the Cape, and trips to Europe in the years they didn’t go to Florida; but, then, so did everybody, more or less.

And then the Billingses’ very dearest friends, Frank and Lucy Eggleston, upped and moved to England. It was something, Frank confided, they had thought about for years; they detested America, the way it was going—the vulgarity, the beggary, the violence. They both, Frank and Lucy, were exceptionally soft-spoken and virtual teetotallers, with health diets and peaceable hobbies; Frank did watercolors, Lucy bird-watched. A juncture came in his career when the corporation asked him to move to Texas. He opted to take early retirement instead, and with his savings and a little inheritance of hers, plus the ridiculous price their house brought—ten times what they had paid for it in the early Sixties—they moved to England, at a time when the pound was low against the dollar. Why defer a dream, they asked the Billingses, until you’re too old to enjoy it? They found a suitable house not in one of the pretty counties south of London but up in Norfolk, where, as one of Lucy’s early letters put it, “The sky is as big as they say the sky of Texas is.”

The letters were less frequent than the Billingses had expected, and on their side they proved slower than they had promised to arrange a visit to their transplanted friends. Three years had gone by before they at last, after some days in London to adjust to the time change and the coinage and the left-right confusion, took a train north, got off at a station beyond Cambridge, and were greeted in the damp and windy spring twilight by a bouncy, bog-hatted shadow they eventually recognized as Frank Eggleston. He had put on weight, and had acquired that rosy English complexion and an un-American way of clearing his throat several times in rapid succession. As they drove along the A-11, and then navigated twisting country roads, Carter seemed to hear Frank’s accent melt, becoming less clipped and twitchy as his passengers and he talked and warmed the car’s interior with their growly, drawling Americanness.

They arrived, after many a turning in the growing dark, at “Flinty Dell”—a name no natives, surely, would have given the slightly gaunt mustard-brick house, with its many gables and odd-sized, scattered windows, behind its high wall and bristlings of privet. Lucy seemed much as ever. A broad-faced strawberry blonde, she had always worn sweaters and plaid pleated skirts and low-heeled shoes for her birding walks, and here this same outfit seemed a shade more chic and less aggressively “sensible” than it had at home. Her pleasant plain looks, rather lost in the old crowd of heavily groomed suburban wives, had bloomed in this climate; her manner, as she showed them the house and their room upstairs, seemed to Carter somehow blushing, bridal. She escorted them through a maze of brightly papered rooms and awkward little hallways, up one set of stairs and down another, and on through the kitchen to a mudroom, where she and Frank outfitted themselves with scarves and Wellingtons and fat leather gloves and canes and riding crops and rakes and shovels for their dealings with the constantly invigorating out-of-doors. A barn went with the place, where they boarded horses. The village church was just across the pasture and through the wood on a path. Some obscure duke’s vast estate stretched all about, with miles and miles of wonderful riding. And then there were fens, and a priory ruin, and towns where antiques could be had for almost nothing. It was all too much to take in, or to talk about, so late at night, Lucy said, especially when the Billingses must be exhausted and still on funny time.

“Oh no,” Jane said. “Carter was de*ter*mined to get on your time and he wouldn’t let me take even a nap that first, awful day. We walked all the way in the rain from the National Gallery to the Tate, where they had a huge retrospective of this horrid Kitchen Sink school.”

“Such fun you make it sound,” Lucy said, tucking her plump freckled calves under her on the tired-looking sofa. The living room was rather small, though high-ceilinged. The furniture, which they must have bought here, clustered like a threadbare, expectant audience about the tiny grated fireplace, as it vivaciously consumed chunks of wood too short to be called logs. “We thought we’d be going down to London every other day but there seems so much to do *here*.”

The birding was incredible, and Lucy had become, to her own surprise, quite involved with the local church and with village good works. Frank was painting very seriously, and had joined an artists’ association in Norwich, and had displayed a number of watercolors in their biannual shows. Lately he had switched from watercolors to oils. Some of his new works were hung in the living room: wet gray skies and tiny dark houses in the lee of gloomy groves scrubbed in with purple and green. Having poked the fire, and added more chunks (whose smoke smelled narcotically sweet), Frank pressed drinks upon the Billingses though, as all agreed, it was already late and tomorrow was a big day. Lucy was going to drive them to the sea while Frank rode in the local hunt. Scotch, brandy, port, Madeira, and several tints of sherry were produced; Carter remembered the Egglestons as abstemious, but English coziness seemed to have teased that out of them. Carter drank port and Jane cream sherry as they gave the American news: Mitch Lothrop and the Jamaican bodybuilder live in Bay Village and have had a baby, and Augustina has turned that big Weston place into some sort of commune, with a total of five women living in it now. Ken McEvoy is out, having served less than two years, and has been given a job by one of the big Boston banks, because now he’s supposedly an expert on fraudulent bookkeeping. Though he and Molly still drive their old Jaguar and a Volvo station wagon, it’s obvious he must have stashed millions away, because they’re always flying off, even just for weekends, to this place they seem to own in the Bahamas. And so on.

Frank and Lucy had grown smilingly silent under this barrage of imported gossip, and when Carter stood and announced, “We’re boring you,” neither of them contradicted him. He had lost count of the times Frank had refreshed his port, or poured himself another brandy, and the freckles on Lucy’s shins were beginning to swarm; yet he felt he was cutting something short, standing at last. All seemed to feel this—this failure, for all their good will, to remake the old connection—and it was in an atmosphere of reluctance that the guests were, sensibly, led up to bed, Lucy showing them the bathroom again and making sure they had towels.

In the night, Carter awoke and needed to go to the bathroom. All that port. A wind was blowing outside. Vague black-on-blue tree shapes were thrashing. Not turning on a light, so as not to wake Jane, he found the bedroom door, opened it softly in the dark, and took two firm steps down the hall toward where he remembered the bathroom was. On his second step, there was nothing but air beneath his foot. His sleepy brain was jolted into action; he realized he was falling down the stairs. As he soared through black space, he had time to think what a terrible noise his crashing body would make, and how the Egglestons would be awakened, and how embarrassing and troublesome it would be for them to deal with his broken body. He even had time to reflect how oddly selfless this last thought was. Then something—some*one*, he felt—hit him a solid blow in the exact center of his chest, right on the sternum, and Carter was standing upright on what seemed to be a landing partway down the stairs. He listened a moment, heard only the wind as it moaned around the strange brick house, and climbed the six or so steps back to the second floor.

He remembered now that the bathroom was reached by turning immediately left out of the bedroom and then right at the bannister that protected the stairwell, and then left again, at the second door. He crept along and pressed this door open. The white toilet and porcelain basin had a glow of their own in the moonless night, so again he did without a light. His legs were trembling and his chest ached slightly but he felt better for having emptied his bladder. However, emerging again into the dark hall, he couldn’t find the way back to his bedroom. Walls as in a funhouse surrounded him. A large smooth plane held a shadowy man who actually touched him, with an abrupt oily touch, and he realized it was himself, reflected in a mirror. On the three other sides of him there were opaque surfaces panelled like doors. Then one of the doors developed a crack of dim blue light and seemed to slide diagonally away; Carter’s eyes were adjusted to the dark enough to register wallpaper—faintly abrasive and warm to his touch—and the shiny straight gleam, as of a railroad track, of the bannister. He reversed his direction. There seemed many doors along the hall, but the one he pushed open did indeed reveal his bedroom. The wind was muttering, fidgeting at the stout English window sash, and as Carter drew closer to the bed he could hear Jane breathe. He crept in beside her and in the same motion fell asleep.

Next morning, as he examined the site of his adventure, he marvelled that he had not been killed. The oval knob of a newel post at the turn in the stairs must have been what struck him on the chest; had he fallen a slightly different way, it would have hit him in the face—smashed in his front teeth, or ripped out an eye—or he could have missed it entirely and broken his neck against the landing wall. He had no memory of grabbing anything, or of righting himself. But how had he regained his feet? Either his memory had a gap or he had been knocked bolt upright. If the latter, it seemed a miracle; but Jane, when he confided the event to her, took the occasion not for marvelling but for showing him, as one would show a stupid child, how to turn on the hall light, with one of those British toggle switches that look like a stumpy rapier with a button on its tip.

Carter felt rebuffed; he had told her of his nocturnal adventure, while they were still in bed, in hushed tones much like hers when, thirty years ago, she would confide a suspicion that she was pregnant. The Egglestons, downstairs at breakfast, responded more appropriately; they expressed amazement and relief that he hadn’t been hurt. “You might have been *killed!*” Lucy said, with a rising inflection that in America had never been quite so pert, so boldly birdlike.

“Exactly,” Carter said. “And at the time, even as I was in midair, I thought, ‘What a nuisance for the poor Egglestons!’ ”

“Damn white of you,” Frank said, lifting his teacup to his face. He was in a hurry to be off to his hunt; he had been up for several hours, doing a painting that needed dawn light, and there were blue and yellow on his fingernails. “Not to pop off on us,” he finished.

“It happens,” Carter told him. “More and more, you see your contemporaries in the *Globe* obituaries. The Big Guy is getting our range.” This outburst of theology was so unexpected that the three others stared at him with a silence in which the chimneys could be heard to moan and the breakfast china to click. Carter felt, however, unembarrassed, and supernaturally serene. The world to which he had awoken, from the English details of the orange-juice-less, marmalade-laden breakfast set before him to the muddy green windswept landscape framed in the thick-sashed and playfully various windows, reminded him of children’s books he had read over fifty years ago, and had the charm of the timeless.

He squeezed his feet into Lucy’s Wellingtons and walked out with Frank to admire the horses. This Norfolk earth was littered with flint—chalky, sharp-edged pebbles. He picked one up and held it in his hand. It felt warm. A limestone layer, porous like bone, had wrapped itself around a shiny bluish core. He tried to imagine the geological event—some immense vanished ocean—that had precipitated this hail of bonelike fragments. The abundant flint, the tufty grass so bursting with green, the radiant gray sky, the strong smells of horse and leather and feed and hay all bore in upon Carter’s revitalized senses with novel force; there seemed a cosmic joke beneath mundane appearances, and in the air a release of pressure which enabled the trees, the beeches and oaks, to attain the size of thunderheads. The air was raw—rawer than he had expected England in April to be. “Is the wind always like this?” he asked the other man.

“Pretty much. It’s been a tardy spring.” Frank, in a hunting coat and jodhpurs, had saddled a horse in its stall and was fiddling with the bridle, making the long chestnut head of the animal, with its rubbery gray muzzle and rolling gelatinous eyeball, jerk resentfully. The physical fact of a horse—the pungent, assaultive hugeness of the animal and the sense of a tiny spark, a gleam of skittish and limited intelligence, within its monstrous long skull—was not a fact that Carter had often confronted in his other life.

“Doesn’t it get on your nerves?”

“Does ’em good,” Frank said with his acquired brisk bluffness. “Scours you out.”

“Yes,” Carter said, “I can feel that.” He felt delicate, alert, excited. The center of his chest was slightly sore. His toes were numb and scrunched inside Lucy’s boots. With a terrible shuffling of hooves and heaving of glossy mass, the horse was led from the barn and suddenly Frank was up on it, transformed, majestic, his pink face crowned by his round black hat, he and the horse a single new creature. The two women came out of the mustard-brick house to watch its master ride off, at a stately pace, down the flinty driveway to the path through the wood. The trees, not yet in full leaf, were stippled all over with leaflets and catkins, like a swathe of dotted swiss. Frank, thus veiled, slowly vanished. “A stirring sight,” Carter said. It came upon him that some such entertainment, astonishing yet harmless, would be his steady diet here. He was weightless, as if, in that moment of flight headlong down the stairs, he had put on wings.

Lucy asked them which they would like first, the walk to the river or the drive to the sea. Then she decided the two should be combined, and a supply of boots and overshoes was tossed into the car. Carter got in the back of the little Austin—red, though it had looked black at the station last night—and let the two women sit up front together. Jane occupied what in America would have been the driver’s seat, so that Carter felt startled and imperilled when she turned her head aside or gestured with both hands. Lucy seemed quite accustomed to the wrong side of the road, and drove with a heedless dash. “Here is the village, these few houses,” she said. “And the church just beyond—you can’t see it very well because of that huge old chestnut. Incredibly old, they say the tree is. The church isn’t so old.”

On the other side of the road, there were sheep, dusted all over with spots of color and mingled with gamboling lambs. The river was not far off, and Lucy parked by an iron bridge where water poured in steady cold pleats down the slant face of a concrete weir. Embankments had been built by stacking bags of cement and letting natural processes dampen and harden them. Lucy led the way along a muddy path between the riverbank and a field that had been recently plowed; the pale soil, littered to the horizon with bonelike bits of flint, was visibly lifting into the silvery, tumbling sky. The wind was scouring dark trails of soil upward, across the plowed miles.

“It’s been almost a drought,” Lucy said, her voice uplifted, her kerchief flattened against her freckled cheek. Her eyes, squinting, were a pale color between blue and green, and this beryl, beneath this wild sky, had an uncanny brilliance. “Oh, look!” she cried, pointing. “A little marsh tit, doing his acrobatics! Last week, closer to the woods, I saw a pair of waxwings. They generally go back to the continent by this time of year. Am I boring you both? Really, the wind is frightful, but I want you to see my gray heron. His nest *must* be in the woods somewhere, but Frank and I have never been able to spot it. We asked Sedgewick—that’s the duke’s gamekeeper—where to look for it, and he said if we got downwind we would *smell* it. They eat meat, you know—rodents and snakes.”

“Oh dear,” Jane said, for something to say. Carter couldn’t take his eyes from the distant dark lines of lifting earth, the Texas-like dust storm. As the three made their way along the river, the little black-capped tit capered in the air above them, and as they approached the woods, out flocked starlings, speckled and black and raucous.

“Look—the kingfisher!” Lucy cried. This bird was brilliant, ruddy-breasted and green-headed, with a steel-blue tail. It flicked the tail back and forth, then whirred along the river’s glittering surface. But the gray heron was not showing himself, though they trod the margin of the woods for what seemed half a mile. They could hear tree trunks groaning as the wind twisted their layered crowns; the tallest and leafiest trees seemed not merely to heave but to harbor several small explosions at once, which whitened their tossing branches in patches. Carter’s eyes watered, and Jane held her hands in their fat, borrowed gloves in front of her face.

At last, their hostess halted. She announced, “We better get on with it—what a disappointment,” and led them back to the car.

As they drew close to the glittering, pleated, roaring weir, Carter had the sudden distinct feeling that he should look behind him. And there was the heron, sailing out of the woods toward them, against the wind, held, indeed, motionless within the wind, standing in midair with his six-foot wingspread—an angel.

The wind got worse as they drove toward the sea. On the map, it looked a long way off, but Lucy assured them she had often done it and returned by teatime. As she whipped along the narrow roads, Carter in the back seat could not distinguish between her tugs on the steering wheel and the tugs of the wind as it buffeted the Austin. A measured, prissy voice on the radio spoke of a gale from the Irish Sea and of conditions that were “near-cyclonic,” and Jane and Carter laughed. Lucy merely smiled and said that they often used that expression. In a village especially dear to her, especially historical and picturesque, a group of people were standing on the sidewalk at the crest of a hill, near the wall of a churchyard. The church was Norman, with ornamental arcs and borders of red pebbles worked into the masonry. Lucy drove the car rather slowly past, to see if there had been an accident.

“I think,” Carter offered, “they’re watching the tree.” A tall tree that leaned out from within the churchyard was swaying in the wind.

“Bother,” Lucy said. “I’ve driven too far—what I wanted to show you was back in the middle of the village.” She turned around, and as they drove by again several of the little crowd, recognizing the car, seemed amused. A policeman, wearing a rain cape, was pedalling his bicycle up the hill, very energetically, head down.

What Lucy wanted the Billingses to see in the village was a side street of sixteenth-century houses, all of them half-timbered and no two skewed from plumb at the same angle.

“Who lives in them?” Carter wanted to know.

“Oh, people—though I daresay more and more it’s trendy younger people who open up shops on the ground floor.” Lucy backed around again and this time, coming up the hill, they met a police barricade, and the tall tree fallen flat across the road. Just half of the tree, actually; its crotch had been low to the earth, and the other half, with a splintery white wound in its side, still stood.

The three Americans, sealed into their car, shrieked in excitement, understanding now why the villagers had been amused to see them drive past under the tree again. “You’d think somebody,” Jane said, “might have shouted something, to warn us.”

“Well, I suppose they thought,” said Lucy, “we had eyes to see as well as they. That’s how they are. They don’t give anything away; you have to go to them.” And she described, as they bounced between thorny hedgerows and dry-stone walls, her church work, her charity work in the area. It was astonishing, how much incest there was, and drunkenness, and hopelessness. “These people just can’t envision any better future for themselves. They would never *dream*, for example, of going to London, even for a day. They’re just totally locked into their little world.”

Jane asked, “What about television?”

“Oh, they watch it, but don’t see that it has anything to do with them. They’re taken care of, you see, and compared with their fathers and grandfathers aren’t so badly off. The *cru*elty of the old system of hired agricultural labor is almost beyond imagining; they worked people absolutely to death. Picking flint, for instance. Every spring they’d all get out there and pick the flint off the fields.”

That didn’t seem, to Carter, so very cruel. He had picked up bits of flint on his own, spontaneously. They were porous, pale, intricate, everlasting. His mind wandered as Lucy went on about the Norfolk villagers and Jane chimed in with her own concerns—her wish, now that the children were out of the house, to get out herself and to be of some service, not exactly jump into the ghetto with wild-eyed good intentions but do something *use*ful, something with *peo*ple.…

Carter had been nodding off, and the emphasized words pierced his doze. He felt he had been useful enough, in his life, and had seen enough people. At the office now—he was a lawyer—he was conscious of a curious lag, like the lag built into radio talk shows so that obscenities wouldn’t get on the air. Just two or three seconds, between challenge and response, between achievement and gratification, but enough to tell him that something was out of sync. He was going through the motions, and all the younger people around him knew it. When he spoke, his voice sounded dubbed, not quite his own. There were, it had recently come to him, vast areas of the world he no longer cared about—Henry James, for example, and professional ice hockey, and nuclear disarmament. He did not doubt that within these areas much excitement could be generated, but not for him, nevermore. The two women in front of him—Lucy’s strawberry-blond braids twitching as she emphasized a point and Jane’s gray-peppered brunette curls softly bouncing as she nodded in eager empathy—seemed alien creatures, like the horse, or the marsh tit with his little black-capped head. The two wives sounded as stirred up and twittery as if their lives had just begun—as if courtship and husbands and childbearing were a preamble to some triumphant menopausal ministry among the disenfranchised and incestuous. They loved each other, Carter reflected wearily. Women had the passion of conspirators, the energy of any underground, supplied by hope of seizing power. Lucy seemed hardly to notice, while talking and counselling Jane, that she had more than once steered around the wreckage of tree limbs littering the road. Through the car windows Carter watched trees thrash in odd slow motion and overhead wires sway as if the earth itself had lost its moorings.

Then, out of the bruised and scrambled sky, rain pelted down with such fury that the wipers couldn’t keep the windshield clear; it became like frosted glass, and the car roof thrummed. Lucy lifted her voice: “There’s a lovely old inn right in the next village. Would this be a good time to stop and have a bite?”

Just in dashing the few yards from the parking lot to the shelter of the inn, the three of them got soaked. Inside, all was idyllic: big old blackened fireplace crackling and hissing and exuding that sweet scent of local woodsmoke, carved beams bowed down almost to Carter’s head, buffet of salmon mousse and Scotch eggs and shepherd’s pie served by a willing lad and blushing lass, at whose backs the rain beat like a stage effect on the thick bottle panes. The middle-aged trio ate, and drank beer and tea; over Lucy’s protests, Carter paid.

Next door, an antique shop tempted tourists through a communicating archway, and while the storm continued, Lucy and her visitors browsed among the polished surfaces, the silver and mirrors, the framed prints and marquetry tables. Carter was struck by a lustrous large bureau, veneered in a wood that looked like many blurred paw prints left by a party of golden cats. “Elm burl, early eighteenth century,” the ticket said, along with a price in the thousands of pounds. He asked Jane if she would like it—as if one more piece of furniture might keep her at home, away from good works.

“Darling, it’s lovely,” she said, “but so expensive, and so big.”

Elm burl: perhaps that was the charm, the touch of attractive fantasy. In America, the elms were dead, as dead as the anonymous workman who had laid on this still-glamorous veneer.

“They ship,” he responded, after a few seconds’ lag. “And if it doesn’t fit anywhere we can sell it on Charles Street for a profit.” His voice didn’t sound quite like his own, but only he seemed to notice. The women’s conversation in the car had obligated him to make a show of power, male power.

Lucy, intensifying her hint of a British accent, courteously haggled with the manager—a straggly fat woman with a runny red nose and a gypsyish shawl she held tight around her throat—and got four hundred pounds knocked off the price. Carter’s plunge into this purchase frightened him, momentarily, as he realized how big the mark-up must be, to absorb such a discount so casually.

There were forms to sign, and credit cards to authenticate over the telephone; as these transactions were pursued, the storm on the roof abated. The three buyers stepped out into a stunning sunlit lapse in the weather. Raindrops glistened everywhere like a coating of ice, and the sidewalk slates echoed the violet of the near-cyclonic sky.

“Darling, that was so debonair and dashing and untypical of you,” Jane said.

“Ever so larky,” Lucy agreed.

“Kind of a game,” he admitted. “What are the odds we’ll ever see that chest again?”

Lucy took mild offense, as if her adopted fellow-countrymen were being impugned. “Oh they’re very honest and reputable. Frank and I have dealt with these people a few times ourselves.”

A miraculous lacquer lay upon everything, beading each roadside twig, each reed of thatch in the cottage roofs, each tiny daisy trembling in the grass by the lichen-stained field walls. Then clouds swept in again, and the landscape was dipped in shadow. Many trees were fallen or split. Little clusters of workmen, in raincoats that were pumpkin-colored instead of, as they would have been in America, yellow or Day-Glo orange, buzzed with saws and pulled with ropes at limbs that intruded into the road. Waiting to be signalled past such work parties took time, while the little Austin gently rocked in the wind, as if being nudged by a giant hand. Carter caressed the sensitive center of his chest, under his necktie: his secret, the seal of his nocturnal pact, his passport to this day like no other. It had felt, in the dark, like a father’s rough impatient saving blow. “How much farther to the sea?” he asked.

“Well might you ask,” Lucy said. “On a day of smooth sailing, we’d be there by now.” The cars ahead of them slowed and then stopped entirely. A policeman with a young round face explained that lines were down across the road.

“That does rather tear it,” Lucy allowed. The detour would add fifteen miles at least to their journey. The landscape looked dyed, now, in an ink that rolled across the pale speckled fields in waves of varying intensity. Along a far ridge, skeletal power-line towers marched in a procession, their latticework etched with a ghostly delicacy against the black sky. A band of angels.

Jane consoled Lucy: “Really, dear, if I saw too many more charming villages I might burst.”

“And we see the sea all the time when we’re on the Cape,” Carter added.

“But not *our* sea,” Lucy said. “The *North* Sea.”

“Isn’t it just ugly and cold and full of oil?” asked Jane.

“Not for much longer, they tell us. Full of oil, I mean. Well, if you two don’t really mind, I suppose there’s nothing to do but go back. Frank *does* like an early supper after he’s been on a hunt.”

It was growing dark by the time they reached Flinty Dell. Exposing to view a small, drab Victorian church, the ancient chestnut had blown down—a giant shaggy corpse with a tall stump torn like a shriek, pointing at the heavens. The tree had fallen across a churchyard wall and crushed it, the outer courses of sturdy-seeming brick spilling a formless interior of rubble and sand.

Frank came out into the driveway to meet them; in the dusk, his face looked white, and his voice was not amused. “My God, where have you people *been?* I couldn’t believe you’d be out driving around in this! The hunt was called off, the radio’s been cancelling everything and telling people for Christ’s sake to *stay off the roads!*” He rested a trembling hand on the sill of the rolled-down car window; his little fingernail still bore an azure fleck of today’s dawn.

“In this bit of a breeze?” Lucy cooed.

Jane said, “Why, Frank darling, how nice of you to be worried.”

And Carter, too, was surprised and amused that Frank didn’t know they were beyond all that now.