# Wildlife

# John Updike

The town was sexy, or so it had always seemed to Ferris. He had lived there for years, and his former wife still lived there. It was a town by the sea, with marshes and a broad beach; summer had been a fête of sunburn and short skirts and cookouts and insect bites. Not only mosquitoes and midges and gnats but a curious plenitude of ticks and green-headed, bloodthirsty flies bred in the marshes and the winding saltwater channels. An air of siege persisted through the other seasons—fall pinching in with an ever-earlier darkness, winter when on the crooked slick roads cars slid into one another with a dreamlike slow motion, spring with its raw east wind and bouts of flu and considerable human irritability.

The town was not for everybody; it had no country club, its politics were unedifying, its schools were only fair, its tax base needed broadening. Up-and-coming young commuters to Boston, or hi-tech engineers employed along Route 128, moved elsewhere, to more proper towns—one with a pretty blue harbor lined in granite and adorned with the yacht club’s domed gazebo, another equipped with horses and stables and a weekly fox hunt, a third boasting a precious historic district of early-Federal homes, a fourth full of grand estates waiting to be subdivided. All of these towns were more suitable and sounder investments for the aspiring than the ragged, raffish settlement where Ferris had lived in his physical prime.

Its natural beauty had verged on wildness and could overflow into violence. Marital scandals would suddenly rip through the school board or the Methodist choir. Early-morning murder-suicides would bestow a blasted aura upon a pale-green house hitherto innocuous in its row. Weather would hit oddly hard, so that power would be lost for the week after a nor’easter that had hardly touched the rest of the coast, or a drought would dry up the private wells and expose the gravel bottom of the town reservoir. Fires were common in this old town built almost entirely of wood. In the years after Ferris left, first one white Congregational church burned down—an irreplaceable example of carpenter Gothic—and then another, a noble Greek Revival edifice erected in a parish schism in 1842. The movie house, with its quaint Arabian Nights décor from the 1930s, vanished in yet another holocaust, along with the adjacent paint store, its cans of turpentine and Williamsburg colors exploding like rapid artillery. Ferris’s growing children reported these disasters to him, along with their own. He had remarried and lived in Boston.

Returning to the town, to take a child to dinner or to consult his dentist, who was aging along with him, he never failed to be uplifted by the local ambience into a sexier, more buoyant self. His very step became more youthful, and the rub of his shirt against his skin took on a suggestive nervous tension. Almost no one, after ten years, knew Ferris—even the corner drugstores, once operated by rival selectmen, had changed hands—but he was greeted by the familiar proportions of the buildings, the erratic layout of the streets, and unexpected souvenirs of his past: an antique store still offered, it appeared, the same sun-baked furniture in the window, a gray-haired postman was still doing his rounds, a graceful great elm hadn’t died yet, a straggling stretch of dirt sidewalk hadn’t yet been paved. The town was patchy, informal, with seams where the true stuff of life—dirt, sex, saltwater, death—kept leaking through. Even the town’s children and dogs, as Ferris saw them, were scruffier and cannier than those of better-organized, more antiseptic communities.

In the ten years since he had left, a further plague had been visited upon the town—a plague of deer. Even while he had been a resident, housewives along the beach road would complain that in the night deer had consumed all their tulips and that their newly planted dogwoods and crabapples had been fatally girdled by deer nibbling the bark. But the marauders were furtive and shy, and it was considered a treat for the children, better than a trip to the zoo, when an October walk on the beach yielded a glimpse of deer, their white tails flicking, bounding away into the dunes.

Ferris still remembered a moment, freighted with guilt and rapture, early in his separation from his wife, when the property where he had lived still called forth his husbandry. He had come out from Boston and he and his son, Jamie, then in his mid-teens, were up on the tennis court, readying it for winter by placing two-by-fours on the tapes and weighting them with rocks. Otherwise, the freezing and thawing of the clay lifted the aluminum nails during the winter. Ferris happened to glance up. At the far edge of the shaggy field a family of deer had emerged from the woods. It was an unseasonably warm day in November, misty, and in this mist the forms of the three deer—the stag, the doe, and the smallest, no longer a fawn—hesitated as if posed in a soft old photograph, elegant gray-brown creatures from the dignified prehuman world.

“Look!” Ferris told his son quietly, but even this whispered utterance sent the ghostly forms racing, bounding across the wet unmowed field to the patch of woods in the opposite corner of the property, where the tidal creek turned. Ferris had not felt entitled, that haggard guilty day on the edge of winter, to so magical a sight, and had pressed it upon his son as if in compensation for his coming years of absence.

Now his son, in his mid-twenties and called James or Jim, had grown accustomed to his absence, and the deer had become a famous civic problem, which Ferris read about in the Boston newspapers. They multiplied while the undeveloped land around them diminished; starving, they robbed the dunes of vegetation and ravished the landscaping of the expensive seaview homes being built above the marshes. A Christmas tree tossed out into the snow was stripped of needles by the frantic animals, even in daylight; at night, high-school couples parking on the beach lot found themselves surrounded by a crowd of deer standing mute and mendicant around the car. The deer in their delicate heraldic beauty had become as pestilential as rats, and the town, with its curious flair for scandal, where another town might have found a quiet solution, debated the issue into a storm of publicity. Nature-lovers from the other end of the commonwealth came to protest the selectmen’s proposal to import hired Army sharpshooters to reduce the herds. Irate women threatened to mingle, dressed in deerskin, with the animals on the scheduled day, thus sacrificing their own lives to the ideal of unpolluted natural process. Several veterinarians came to testify that starvation is relatively painless and weeds out the weak; others counter-testified that it is agony and selectively destroys the young. There were meetings, picketing, interviews on television. Meanwhile, throughout large regions of the town—and these the most fashionable and expensive—garbage cans were kicked open, azalea bushes eaten leafless, and dead deer bodies found frozen out by the bird feeders.

Then, worse yet, it developed that the deer population was crawling with the tiny tick *Ixodes dammini*, which in turn harbored the spirochetes of Lyme disease, named after the town in Connecticut where it first was recognized. Round red lesions, malaise and fatigue, chills and fever and stiff neck: these are its symptoms. Its final results can be heart damage and lifelong arthritis. We live in plague times. As our species covers the earth like a scum, the bacteria and viruses and parasites inventively thrive. When Ferris lived in the town, no thought was given, for example, to venereal disease. Herpes and AIDS and chlamydia were unheard of; sexual affairs involved a spiritual and economic peril only. Men and women tasted one another as if at a smorgasbord of uncontaminated dishes, a tumble of treats, some steaming, some chilled, some nutritious, some not, but all clean.

The deer-lovers were overruled, and on appointed days the sharpshooters descended on the dunes. But cases of Lyme disease continued to trickle into the local hospital from all along the beach road, where property values, always high, had been soaring, and now dipped.

Ferris’s old property was not on the beach road, but on a road off of it, that led nowhere. The road went over a small arched bridge that spanned a tidal creek, passed a few more houses, and then became a turnaround of packed dirt amid the encroaching marsh grass, with its bleached litter of beer cans and horseshoe-crab shells. The road was paved as far as the bridge, and Ferris knew every turn, sway, and jolt in the ride; it, too, seemed sexy, and brought back younger days. It had been a woman’s town, dominated by female energy. To find oneself, of a weekday afternoon, in bed with another man’s wife was to have achieved a certain membership—an accreditation in primordial coin, a basic value within an Amazonian tribe. At parties, there were four kinds of people: women who had known a number of the men, men who had known a number of the women, and men and women who were innocent. Sometimes the latter were married to the uninnocent, and that produced sadness and divorce. Ferris was returning to visit Jamie, who was house-sitting while the former Mrs. Ferris was off for a week in Nova Scotia with the latest of the series of lovers and attendants that for ten years had failed to yield another husband. Ferris for all his failings had proved to be irreplaceable.

The boy greeted his father with complaints, and looked exhausted. He stooped, and had not shaved for a day or two, so that black whiskers of an alarming virility stood out on his jaw and chin. “I’ve been trying to impose some order on the bushes,” he explained. “Mom just lets everything grow. She has this philosophy that every plant has a right to live.”

Yes, Ferris recalled, that had been the local philosophy; while the women of surrounding, proper towns tended their gardens and joined Garden Clubs, the housewives here went off to the beach to deepen their already savage-looking tans. Personal cultivation had been the style, and horticultural neglect a token of liberation. Once Ferris had tried to prune a giant wisteria vine that was prying clapboards off the house, and his wife had accused him of being a butcher, a killer. All he had craved had been a little order. She had thought dandelions and burdock rather pretty and allowed the forsythia bush to swallow the yew hedge. The lawn had been mown primarily for croquet games and had emitted a different aroma in each month of summer—that of a spicy fresh salad in June, of a well’s deep walls in July, and of dry hay in August, with scuffed patches of earth around the improvised soccer goals, and oil-stains where the children had worked on their bicycles.

August was Ferris’s favorite month. It was August now. “Jimmy, just don’t get into the poison ivy,” he warned his son, who as a boy had had a fearful case of it, his eyes swollen shut above scarlet, oozing cheeks. “Shiny leaves, always in sets of three. Not serrated and feathery, like Virginia creeper. Shiny, with a pinkish stem.”

“That reminds me, Dad. I have something to show you.”

“What?” Ferris’s heart skipped a beat.

“I’ll show you inside.”

Ferris took this as an invitation to survey the outdoors first. He and this boy who had replaced him as the man of the place walked up through the remnants of a onetime orchard to the neglected tennis court. The wire fencing that had once been virgin and rust-free, stapled to bolt-upright posts fragrant with creosote, now sagged under the burden of entwined honeysuckle. Rotten old sails had been spread along the edges, to suppress the weeds that invaded from the field. Ferris looked up toward the place in the field where he had once seen the deer, but saw only forest, taller and coming closer. Old photographs of this region showed clean curves of land, stripped for firewood and cropped by sheep, and a view clear across low drumlins to the sea. Now shaggy groves covered the high ground, and the saltwater of the channel merely glinted through, with the noise of motorboats and of teenagers gleefully shouting.

“A big job,” he sighed to his son. In August, there came a scratching in the air, an unlocatable buzzing undercurrent that people called crickets or cicadas but that Ferris associated with the sound that a bedside electric clock makes beside an insomniac’s head in the night.

“And the dumb pear trees,” his son went on, in that affronted voice children use, “keep producing all these pears to drop into the grass to gum up the mower.” His tone was a child’s but his timbre adult, an aggrieved baritone that went with the black whiskers, the thick powerful legs, the big-boned wrists and hands. Ferris had trouble understanding the sex lives of his adult children. He had met some of this son’s girlfriends; they were presentable young women with well-conditioned figures, oily bleached ringlets, bright eyes, relaxed and sympathetic manners, and mouths curved in expectation of being amused. Yet, no sooner had Ferris mastered the name of one, and the rudiments of her geographical and educational background, than she was gone. None of them lasted, none of them apparently excited that romantic wish so common to men of Ferris’s generation, the wish to marry—to claim in the sight of church and state this female body, to enter into formalized intimacy as if into a territory to be conquered, tamed, sown, and harvested. The wife at the kitchen sink, the wife at the cocktail party or the entr’acte buffet, the wife showering to go out or coming back from shopping with sore feet, the wife docile on one’s arm or excitingly quarrelsome in the back of a taxi: the romance that, for Ferris, had attached to these images and made him want to marry not once but repeatedly had quite vanished from American culture—a casualty, perhaps, of co-ed dormitories or the impossible prices of starter housing. His deep-voiced son, for example, lived here for months at a time, with his lonely mother and her overgrown peony beds.

Dogs bounded around the two men as they crossed the lank brown lawn to the kitchen door. Inside, the animals clattered and slid about on the linoleum in hope of being fed. There were three dogs, disparate mongrels acquired by Ferris’s former family at various impulsive moments and now collected here, along with a neighbor’s dog that had attached itself to the pack. Their hair was everywhere, on rugs and sofas and in little balls collected along the baseboards like tumbleweed along a barbed-wire fence. The furniture, much of it once joint property, seemed to float in temporary arrangement, not rooted in place but at rest—Fifties modern grown old and worn. The teak arms of the Danish chairs were cracked; the glass tabletops looked permanently smeared. His ex-wife had scattered garish throw pillows and squares of Indian cloth about as if to distract the eye, and these many festive patches intensified the air of dishevelment, of carefree improvisation, an air that made the shirt on Ferris’s chest and the very trousers on his legs caress his skin with an excited slither.

His son at his side fetched a weary sigh. “I was going to paint the woodwork for a project but just keeping it halfways tidy in here and the kitchen seems to take all my time.”

Ferris asked, “What did you want to show me?”

“Oh yeah. I, er, have to lower my britches.”

“Really? Well, do, I guess. Don’t be shy. I used to change your diapers.” Ferris’s blood raced with the mystery of it.

Beneath his khaki pants his son wore boxer shorts, such as Ferris associated with old men. His father had worn such baggy underpants. Ferris wore Jockeys, the snugger the better. “On the back of my right thigh, Dad. Up high. See it?”

“A big round red spot. How long have you had it?”

“A while. I remember, about two weeks ago, this little critter bit me. A tiny tick—smaller than a dog tick. I didn’t think much about it but now this terrible itching and this *hot* feeling are there, where I can’t quite see it even with the mirror.”

Ferris asked, though he knew the answer, “You’ve been working in the bushes?”

“I *had* to,” the child whined. “They were coming into the yard. There was hardly any yard left. I’ve been feeling exhausted lately, too.”

“Chills and fever?”

“Chills once in a while. I don’t know about fever. The thermometer’s broken.”

“Is your neck stiff?”

“Only in the mornings, a little sometimes.”

“Jamie, you poor guy. We must get you to a doctor.” As Ferris bent lower to re-examine the symptom, he tried to suppress the happy thought that he had got out just in time.