# Short Easter

# John Updike

Fogel could not remember its ever happening before—the advent of Daylight Saving Time clipping an hour off Easter. Church bells rang in the dark; the pious would be scrambling about in their topcoats and hats turning the clocks ahead. All day, the reluctantly budding earth would wear its crown of cloudy firmament a bit awry. Easter had always struck Fogel as a holiday without real punch, though there was, among the more vivid of his childhood memories, a magical peep into a big sugar egg; it had been at his aunt’s house, in Connecticut, where the houses seemed cleaner than in New Jersey, the people wealthier, the daffodils a brighter yellow. Inside the egg, paper silhouettes spelled out a kind of landscape—a thatch-roofed cottage, a rabbit wearing a vest, a fringe of purple flowers, a receding path and paper mountains—all bathed in an unexpectedly brilliant light. Where had the light come from? There must have been a hole in the egg besides the one he peeped into, a kind of skylight, admitting to this miniature world a celestial illumination.

But, generally, the festivity that should attend the day had fallen rather flat: quarrelsome and embarrassed family church attendances, with nobody quite comfortable in pristine Easter clothes; melancholy egg hunts in some muddy back yard, the smallest child confused and victimized; headachy brunches where the champagne punch tasted sour and conversation lagged. Perhaps if Fogel had not been led to live north of Boston, where at Eastertide croci and daffodils poked up through dead lawns like consciously brave thoughts and even forsythia was shy of blooming, nature might have encouraged the ostensible mood of hope and beginning again. But the day was usually raw, and today was no exception—a day of drizzle and chill, only an hour less of it.

Fogel was sixty-two, and felt retirement drawing closer. In the daily rub he discovered all sorts of fresh reasons for irritation. The line at the post office was held up by people buying money orders, and the line at the grocery store by people buying state lottery tickets. It seemed to him sheer willful obstructionism. Why didn’t these people have checking accounts, and do their gambling on the stock market, as he did? Driving to work, on those days when he did not take the commuter train, Fogel resented being tailgated, and especially by young drivers, and very especially by young men in sunglasses, their identity further shielded by tinted windshields and newly fashionable opaque side windows. One morning, the car behind him, a low scarlet sports model, wore a kind of mask or muzzle of dark vinyl over its grille, and this ultra-chic, ultra-protective touch infuriated him, just as did cardboard sunshields in parked cars, and leather-ridged, fingertipless driving gloves, and fuzz-busters blatantly fastened above dashboards, and bumper stickers declaring SHIT HAPPENS or ironically commanding SUPPORT WILDLIFE—THROW A PARTY. The vinyl-faced car was frantic to pass, and nosed toward the right and, finding there an onrolling eighteen-wheeler, nosed back and swerved left, into a lane that in a few hundred yards terminated in a blinking yellow arrow. Fogel pressed on the accelerator, to keep abreast of the boy and hold him out in the doomed lane. Fogel smiled behind the wheel, picturing the other car’s satisfying crash into the great arrow—the raucous grating of metal, the misty explosion of glass, and himself sailing serenely on in his middle lane. But the boy, getting the picture, cut in so sharply that Fogel had to brake or hit him; he chose to hit the brakes, and the youthful driver, steering one-handed, held up the middle finger of the other hand for Fogel to see as the red car, belching, pulled away.

If Fogel’s stately Mercedes had been equipped with a button that annihilated other vehicles, he would have used it three or four times a mile. Almost every other automobile on the road—those that passed him, those so slow he had to pass them, those going just his speed and hanging in his side mirrors like pursuing furies—seemed a deliberate affront, restricting his freedom and being somehow *pretentious* about it. What was the point of that sinister Darth Vader–like mask over a grille? No point, just pure intimidation. Which was, he had come through sixty years to realize, the aim of eighty-five percent of all human behavior.

His body’s accumulating failures also angered him. His eyelashes kept falling into his eyes, and the presbyopia of late middle age prevented him from seeing, in the mirror, his own eyes well enough to take the lashes out. A tantalizing refusal of focus, like the pressure of water that keeps us from seizing a tempting shell on the sandy bottom of six feet of crystalline sea, frustrated him, and when he put on his reading glasses he could see the dark curved foreign body but not get his fingers and the corner of a handkerchief in behind the lenses to remove it. So he would blink and grimace and curse and wish he had a young wife; his wife’s vision was no better than his own, and dismissingly she said things like “It will work its way out” or “Maybe it just *feels* like an eyelash.” His mother, he could not help but remember, would deftly stab away with a folded piece of toilet paper a fleck of dirt that was tormenting his sensitive cornea. But his mother, he realized now, at the time had been half his present age, though she had seemed ageless, enormous, and omnipotent.

Flying back from New York to Boston late one afternoon this past winter, he had sat across the aisle from a young man and woman, both about thirty, who evidently had not known each other before taking seats side by side. The man was a bit beefy, with a reddish-blond mustache and thinning pale hair; the woman, all but eclipsed from Fogel’s angle, held a large cardboard folder and seemed to be in a state of some excitement. Her hands, gesturing and flickering in front of the oval airplane window, appeared ringless and agitated. Her voice, as she explained herself—the advertising agency she was taking the folder to, her mixed feelings about living in New York, her roommate’s sayings and comical attitude toward life—did a penetrating dance, tireless and insistent, though her voice was high and light. Perhaps she was less than thirty—just starting out, testing her powers. She talked incessantly but, as it were, abashedly, throwing her words out in a feathery way, as if to soften their impact. “Yeahhh?” she would add, nonsensically, to a sentence, and she put on a soft quick giggle, a captivating titter, a kind of shimmer of shyness in which she wrapped her unrelenting verbal assault upon her seatmate, who responded—how could he not?—with ever more murmurous and authoritative replies, concerning cities and work and all other areas where he might be supposed to wield male expertise. This man’s chunky pale hands began to gesture, to chop the air; he pompously crossed and recrossed his legs and preeningly lifted his shoe, rotating the tip; his voice grew gravelly and confiding as the feathery, questioning, giggling, excited voice of the other assaulted his ear and, unintentionally, Fogel’s.

Fogel had been talked to, in the course of his life, by a woman in a voice exactly like this. It had been a bath, her voice, in which he grew weightless, an iridescent bubbly uplifting in which floated always a question, the lilting teasing female question, to which his maleness, clumsy and slow to comprehend though it was, was the only answer. He and this woman, Fogel further remembered, had come, twenty-some years ago, to an unhappy end, which had seemed tragic and hard to swallow at the time but which now, to this elderly man sitting above the clouds while the engines droned and the stewardesses struggled to distribute drinks and the girl across the aisle deliciously prattled and her naked hands flickered against the deepening darkness of the airplane window, appeared merely inevitable, since all things end. One small side-effect still rankled: their affair ended in the springtime, and his former mistress declined to invite him and his family to an Easter-egg hunt she and her husband annually gave. His children’s feelings were hurt, and for consolation they were taken out, after church, to eat at the local International House of Pancakes. Heaps of pancakes, Fogel remembered—buckwheat, buttermilk, blueberry—that seemed, soaked in syrup, almost unswallowably sweet.

And yet, when the plane landed and the scramble to retrieve things from the overhead rack took over, Fogel forgot to look, as he had been intending, at the young woman, to check out her height, her hips, her face full on, her lovely long lively hands, to see if they were truly ringless. While his attention was elsewhere or nowhere she must have stood and brushed her backside past his and out of his life forever. She remained with him only as a voice, the perennial voice of flirtation.

Fogel’s absent-mindedness was becoming alarming. On this strangely short Easter, as bells prodded the air in the town below the hill where he lived, he walked to his mailbox to retrieve the morning *Globe*, and his old gray-muzzled dog, a Labrador retriever, flushed the six or so mourning doves that gathered on a warm open slope, amid scrub brush, above the curving driveway. Every weekend morning, Saturday and Sunday, this happened, the dog ponderously charging forward and the mourning doves thrashing into the air with an abrupt whistle and merged beating of wings, and yet Fogel always forgot it would happen and was startled, so that his heart raced, his blood leaping like another dove. His heart would keep thumping as he walked back up the hill with the many-sectioned, pretentious, intimidating Sunday newspaper in his arms. The thumping felt dangerous, and he felt endangered when his wife, at breakfast, proposed that he help her with the spring raking. “We were unfor*giv*ably sloppy last fall,” she said. “We left leaves under all the bushes and over by the rocks, and now they’ll smother the new growth if we don’t dig them out.” She was a native of these Northern parts, and knew the ways of its weather. “You can’t trust the lawn boys to do it; it was their stupid useless blower that put the leaves there in the first place. They didn’t have these leaf-blowers when I was a girl; my father’s gardeners *raked*.”

Unlike those of the girl on the plane, this woman’s powers were long established, and she felt no need to test them. She moved back and forth between kitchen island and sink, between sink and refrigerator and stove, with an insatiable silver-haired energy. As Fogel sat at the breakfast table with the newspaper, trying to remember which sections he had already read, he felt pushed from behind, tailgated. How did she know he hadn’t, sentimentally, decided to go to church? “I’ll never forget,” she went on, “the year we went to Morocco and didn’t get the leaves off the front beds until May and the poor tulips had all grown *inches* under the mulch—horrible, these pathetic white snaky stems growing sideways! Once the sun got to them they straightened up but all summer until they died back were shaped like the letter L. They all had elbows!” This monologue, he recognized, was a matured version, hardened into jagged edges and points that prodded and hurt, of the young woman’s feathery, immersing discourse across the airplane aisle—a version of that female insistence upon getting male attention, a force as irresistible as the ability of freezing water to split rocks.

“I’m trying to read the paper,” Fogel pointed out.

“I think it’s grotesque, it’s absolutely *dod*dery,” she said, “the way you’ve taken to dawdling over the paper, even the real-estate section, even the cooking tips! It’s a bad habit you’ve gotten into from killing time on the train. Nobody expects you to read *ev*erything—they just want you to glance at the ads.”

“Isn’t it rather cold and dismal outdoors?” he asked.

“No more so than it ever is this time of year. The longer we work, the warmer it will get. If you think about it, darling, the sun this time of year is as strong as an August sun, though it doesn’t feel that way. Don’t be a doddery dawdler; come *on—*one hour of good stiff yard work and then the Allisons’ brunch and you can watch the football playoffs.”

“They’re over.”

“Are they honestly? I thought they were endless.”

“You were confused by the Hula Bowl. It’s hockey and basketball now.”

“How can you tell? It’s all just ugly brutes bashing into each other. It’s horrible, the way television has turned violence into a joke.” She had suddenly left the kitchen.

Meekly, draggingly, Fogel followed. Pulling moist compacted oak leaves from underneath the forsythia and lilacs, careful not to let a budding twig poke his eye, Fogel was reminded of an Easter-egg hunt, and in his reverie, while his wife swooped back and forth with sheets of last year’s leaves and bundles of brisk directives, his brooding mind warmed his old indignation at not having been invited to that party given by his then recently forsaken inamorata. She could have trusted him. He would have stood off to one side and been distant and discreet while his children hunted and his wife mixed it up socially. Insult was added to injury when, some months later, at a third family’s house, he was shown home movies of the day—the scampering children, their faces in close-up smeared with chocolate and anxiety at not getting their share; the men in business suits and pastel shirts, standing on the brown lawn in little conferences of three or four, holding wine glasses and pâté-laden crackers; and the women, all in mini-skirts in that era, swooping about after their children with brown paper bags and discarded sweaters. It was a familiar scene, year after year, except that this year he was not in it; no matter how the camera panned and skidded from group to group, Fogel was invisible. His former mistress wore a glistening purple dress, he seemed to remember, that just barely covered her bustling hindquarters, and she clowned for the camera when it came her way, her lips moving to frame a gay feathery voice that was inaudible.

How tenacious, really, forsythia is of last fall’s leaves! And the English ivy was worse yet, more clingy and snaggy. The teeth of Fogel’s little bamboo bush rake kept snapping in the struggle with hostile vegetation. One of his fantasies was a kind of ray gun that, directed at a plant or tree, would not only kill it but instantly vaporize it into a fine, fertilizing ash. Agricultural labor, this endless plucking of weeds and replowing of fields, had always seemed to him the essence of futility; after sixty years he was coming to realize that all work, legal or medical or, like his own, financial, was also a Sisyphean matter of recycling, of pushing inert and thankless matter back and forth, of turning over (in his case) the profoundly rich compost of corporate debt. All labor was tied to human life, life as pointless as that of any new little jade-green weed already joyously sprouting beneath the damp-blackened leaves.

The Allisons’ brunch was also pointless—the same dozen aging couples, with three widows and a bachelor, that they saw every weekend. Throughout the gathering Fogel kept trying to glimpse, out of the corners of his eyes, the shoulders of his navy-blue blazer, and brushing at the white hairs that kept appearing there; he was shedding. To get himself through a strenuous conversation on the future of yachting after this winter’s debacle in San Diego, he accepted a second Bloody Mary. Then he prudently switched to the faintly sour, platinum-colored champagne punch. One widow told him he should take his cholesterol count very seriously; if her husband had, she wouldn’t be a widow now. Tears suddenly troubled her eyes, with their cobalt-blue contact lenses. Another woman, in a purplish dress, came up to Fogel and pressed her wrinkled face upward toward him as if straining to see through a besmirched skylight, and launched her voice into an insistent sweet sing-song. He regretted that no movie camera—a video camera was what they used now, with a built-in sound track—was at work recording the fact that he was here, at this party: that he had been invited. He and his wife left at two-thirty, which felt nearer noon than that. Because the clocks had been jumped ahead, the day kept feeling in retard of where it actually was. It was later than he thought. The cold drizzle intensified, and discouraged returning to the yard work; the bursitis in his shoulders ached from all that reaching with the rake. He found some golf on television. The tour had moved east from the desert events, with lavender mountains in the background and emerald fairways imposed upon sand and cactus and with ancient Hollywood comedians as tournament sponsors, to courses in the American South, with trees in tender first leaf and azaleas in lurid bloom. Young blond men putted, over and over, for birdies. A tremendous drowsiness seized Fogel as he watched within his easy chair. The fresh air and yard work, the gin and tomato juice, the champagne and the effort to be sociable all added up to a crushing accumulation.

Stealthily, avoiding his own bedroom, where his wife could be heard chattering on the telephone to one of her myriad of woman friends, he took a section of the newspaper that perhaps he had not already read and lay down on the bed in their younger son’s old room. Posters of European cars and American rock stars were still on the walls, though the boy had left for college over ten years ago. His mother liked to keep the room as he had left it, as some fanatical religious sects keep a room ready in case Jesus returns and asks to be a guest. A pipe rattled—fresh steam hitting condensation in an iron elbow. Fogel had become sensitive to his house, identifying with its creaks, its corners of decay, its irreversible expenditures of energy. He tried to study the section, the financial section. “THE DEFICIT PROBLEM—IS IT ALL IN OUR MINDS?” one headline read. Interest rates, restructuring, soft markets, debt, debt …

He rested the paper on the floor beside his son’s narrow bed and fell headlong asleep, while drizzle flecked the windowpanes and steam ticked in the radiators. He dreamed, in the deep colors of true weariness. Electricity wandered through his brain, activating now one set of memory cells and now another. A wash of buried emotion rounded these phantoms into light and shadow, and called up tears and outcries of indignation from Fogel’s phantom self; he presided above the busy lit stage of his subconscious as prompter and playwright, audience and *deus ex machina* as well as hero. His parents hove into view—his father a coarse man, who worked with his hands, and his mother a virgin in her simplicity of mind, her narrow passion to defend as if sacred the little space her family had borrowed from the world. He hugged his pet teddy bear, Bruno. Bruno had a glass eye, on a long wire stem, like a toy flower. His parents were talking above him, urgently to each other, in a language he didn’t know. In their vicinity, Fogel became heavy in every cell, so dense that he fell through into wakefulness, though the dream world tried to cling to his warm body, amid that unnatural ache of resurrection—the weight, the atrocious weight, of coming again to life!

His mouth felt parched, and a dribble from the downward corner of his lips had moistened the pillow. The air of the room was dusky. He did not at first know what room it was, of the many his long life had occupied. A fur of shadow had grown on every surface, even that of the sleek posters. The hour was indeterminate; yet Fogel knew at once that the day was still Easter. How long had he slept, so solidly? Naps were not something he liked to do. Better to store up sleep, at his age, for the night. He listened for his wife’s voice from their bedroom and heard nothing. He was frightened. He lay half curled up on the narrow bed like a fetus that has lost flexibility. A curve of terror chilled his abdomen, silvery and sore; had he been the phantom self of his dreams, he would have cried out aloud with the sensation. His eyes checked the items of the room—shiny posters, vacant fireplace, light plug, bookcase of abandoned schoolbooks, rack of obsolete cassettes, stolen NO PARKING sign, stuffed rabbit wearing a vest—one by one. Everything seemed still in place, yet something was immensely missing.