# Tristan and Iseult

# John Updike

The outward appearances of these women told him almost nothing: some of the prettiest and daintiest turned out to have cold fingers and a merciless touch, whereas some of the plainest, with doughy humorless faces and rimless glasses, enveloped him in velvet sensations. Today’s (a total stranger, as was always the case; the turnover was terrific, suggesting an overheated profession susceptible to stress, pregnancy, and tempting offers from rival establishments) led her customer with a nunnish severity to her little, heavily equipped room and offered him, as she settled him onto his back, only the most grudging small talk. Yet as soon as she touched his mouth he knew that he was home, that she was a rare one, one he could trust not to hurt him more than necessary. The threat of pain was the mystical spice to these liaisons, the Heaven-sent menace that on both sides of the relationship concentrated the attention.

Heaven here was a ceiling of acoustical tiles, perforated irregularly in order to entertain trapped eyes like his. The angelic music was from an “easy listening” station—every third tune, it seemed to him, that nonsensical croon about Key Largo, Bogie and Bacall, here’s looking at you, kid, have it all.…

“Turn your head toward me, please.” Occasionally, one of her bare forearms brushed his ear or nose, stirring up in a small, pollenlike cloud the scent of spanking clean female flesh. Because of AIDS, they wore surgical masks now, and disposable plastic gloves. Death has always been the possible price of contact, but as contacts have multiplied, so have possibilities, forming a continuous moist membrane for viral self-advancement. She worked along his lower gum line, pausing periodically to wipe one of her oblique, needle-sharp instruments on a napkin folded on the plastic tray beside her, next to his head. Some women he had had in the past used his chest as a table, resting their tools on his paper bib—making a small, unprofessional joke, he felt, of their bodily intimacy. This one would never so trespass. Though his open mouth, with its rim of teeth, and the round plastic tray, with its serrated edges, might closely alternate in the field of her attention, she would never imply that they were interchangeable. The tray was merely a thing, whereas the mouth was connected to nerves and a soul—to an ego inside a thing. A sensitive, self-solicitous thing. Her touch, as it methodically travelled along, magnified his tiny dental surfaces, transforming the bumps and crevices of enamel and its porcelain counterfeit into a continuous plane of now dim, now vivid nervous apprehension. Her voice descended: “A little sore tissue under these bridges. Don’t be afraid to get up in there with the floss.”

Silently, in prayer’s shouting inner voice, he assured her that he henceforth would not be afraid, would *not*. He did not speak for fear of dislodging the muttering saliva ejector, which was shaped like a question mark. Sometimes his roving eyes flicked into her own, then leaped away, overwhelmed by their glory, their—as the deconstructionists say—*presence*. His glance didn’t dare linger even long enough to register the color of these eyes; he gathered only the spiritual, starlike afterimage of their living gel, simultaneously crystalline and watery, behind the double barrier of her glasses and safety goggles, above the shield-shaped paper mask hiding her mouth, her chin, her nostrils. So much of her was enwrapped, protected. Only her essentials were allowed to emerge, like a barnacle’s feathery appendages—her touch and her steadfast, humorless gaze.

“Now, away from me a little. Not quite so much. Perfect.”

*Perfect*. Would that he were. She more than anyone knew how imperfect he was. How rotten, in a word. Sinking beyond the reach of shame, he relaxed into her exploration and scarification of his lower molars, corrupt wrecks just barely salvaged from the ruin of his years of heedless, sugar-oriented consumption. Doughnuts, candied peanuts, Snickers bars, licorice sticks, chocolate-coated raisins *… Mea culpa, domina*.

Her attentions, pricking and probing on the ticklish edge of pain, formed as it were a cradle of interwoven curves, from the plump meat of the ball of her thumb tangent upon his upper lip to the arc of her masked face bent an inch or two above his nose. Woven of long soft strands of tactful touch and unstated, clinical thought, she was a kind of basket inverted above him, a woven hut, a yurt; her staring black pupils were the size of the perforations in the acoustic ceiling. She was seeing, and forgiving even as she saw, a side of himself he had never had to face—a microbe-ridden, much-repaired underside. She had an angle on him that he was spared. Other people in general possess this, this instant purchase on the specifics of an exterior self mercifully vague in its self-perception. But their case, his and hers, seemed extreme, like something from a supermarket tabloid or a Harlequin romance. Serenely she presided above his supine abasement. Done with the lowers, she told him to sit up and “have a good rinse.” He spit. Blood, his blood, appeared in the ecru bowl animated by centripetal water. His blood was stringy and spitty and dark. He was even more loathsome than in his humblest moments he had dreamed.

And still she returned to the bout, tackling his uppers, commanding him to open wider. At her faintly more aggressive tone, a sense of counter-striving invaded his body; he seemed to arch upward in the chair, fitting himself with a distinct push into her ministrations. Her flesh, as it touched his, had a resilience slightly greater than that of a cigarette pack, a warmth a bit less than that of a flashlight face, a humidity even more subtle than that of laundry removed five minutes too soon from the dryer. She was made for him, of the same imperilled and fallible substance, yet also woven of Heaven, unpossessable, timeless, inviolate, though focused in her every atom upon him, indeed nonexistent but for him, like air made blue by our own vision, and burned into life by our lungs.

“How’re you doin’?” she asked.

Had he betrayed, by some groan or tensing, discomfort? Had the transfixed state of his soul translated somatically into resistance or involuntary spasm? “Fine.” It felt like a lie—less than the whole story—or like a vow, which is also too simple. Now another mangy pet of the easy-listening stations slid into the room, an arrangement of “The Girl from Ipanema” shorn of the troubling, too-rapid lyrics, which he had once been told were much more suggestive in Brazilian Portuguese.

“Just a little more,” she promised lullingly. “Then we’ll polish and floss.”

“Unnh,” he consented, like a ditto mark under his previous, mendacious yet sincere monosyllabic avowal.

And in her flurry of searching out the last potentially disastrous plaque in the remotest crannies of his upper left molars her spirit intertwined with his. She leaned deeper in; he felt the parallel beams of her gaze like lasers vaporizing his carious imperfections; their bodies became mere metaphor. Timeless moments passed in rhythmic scraping. Then she pulled back and straightened up, her face a mask, her eyes noncommittal. He was clean. He was done. She had done him. “You may rinse,” she said.

The polishing, with its playful caress of microscopic grit, and the flossing—quick, brusque, nimble around and under the bridges—felt anticlimactic. Without the threat of pain, their encounter became small, much as the childish perpetrators of giant agitated shadows, in an attic or a summer-camp shack, shrink when the candle is put out. She did not use that agonizing machine some of the women used, the Cavijet, a high-pressure nozzle with a high-pitched whine, an icy needle on your inflamed nerves. It would have been a cheap effect. The pain, to have meaning, should come purely from her. “Nice,” he said, working his bruised lips over his teeth, as ideal as they could ever be. “How did I look, overall?”

“Uh—do you smoke or drink a lot of tea?”

“No. Why?”

Her mask and goggles were off; she blushed. It was thrilling, to see emotion tinge that prim, professional face. She cared. She had to care, after all. How could she go through these motions and not care? “I just wondered,” she said, turning away in, at last, embarrassment. “You have a fair amount of staining.”

“Maybe that’s my age. Normal deterioration.”

She shook off the idea—it was heretical, perhaps; there existed no normal deterioration in her belief system—and wrote on a chart in his folder, and inscribed a small slip for him to take down to the front desk. Then … then she turned and faced him. Her eyes in the TV-screen-shaped rectangles of her glasses were distinctly, earthily hazel—green flecked with gold and rust above her rosy cheeks, cheeks whose thin skin could no longer conceal the circulating heat of her blood. She hesitated to speak, then took the plunge. “There’s a bleaching process that’s pretty safe and effective,” she said, with a lilt reined in just short of ardor.

There was, but she wouldn’t be the one to witness the shining results. The woman was always a stranger. You never had the same one twice. The principle lay between the two of them like a sword. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be sublime. It wouldn’t be hygiene.