# The Rumor

# John Updike

Frank and Sharon Whittier had come from the Cincinnati area and, with an inheritance of hers and a sum borrowed from his father, had opened a small art gallery on the fourth floor of a narrow brown building on West 57th Street. They had known each other as children; their families had been in the same country-club set. They had married in 1970, when Frank was freshly graduated from Oberlin and Vietnam-vulnerable and Sharon was only nineteen, a sophomore at Antioch majoring in dance. By the time, six years later, they arrived in New York, they had two small children; the birth of a third led them to give up their apartment and the city struggle and to move to a house in Hastings, a low stucco house with a wide-eaved Wright-style roof and a view, through massive beeches at the bottom of the yard, of the leaden ongliding Hudson. They were happy, surely. They had dry Midwestern taste, and by sticking to representational painters and abstract sculptors they managed to survive the uglier Eighties styles—faux graffiti, Germanic-*brut* expressionism, cathode-ray prole-play, ecological-protest trash art—and bring their quiet, chaste string of fourth-floor rooms into the calm lagoon of Nineties eclectic revivalism and subdued recession chic. They prospered; their youngest child turned twelve, their oldest was filling out college applications.

When Sharon first heard the rumor that Frank had left her for a young homosexual with whom he was having an affair, she had to laugh, for, far from having left her, there he was, right in the lamplit study with her, ripping pages out of *ARTnews*.

“I don’t think so, Avis,” she said, to the graphic artist on the other end of the line. “He’s right here with me. Would you like to say hello?” The easy refutation was made additionally sweet by the fact that, some years before, there had been a brief (Sharon thought) romantic flareup between her husband and this caller, an overanimated redhead with protuberant cheeks and chin. Avis was a second-wave appropriationist, who made colored Xeroxes of masterpieces out of art books and then signed them in an ink mixed of her own blood and urine. How could she, who had actually slept with Frank, be imagining this grotesque thing?

The voice on the phone gushed as if relieved and pleased. “I know, it’s wildly absurd, but I heard it from two sources, with absolutely solemn assurances.”

“Who were these sources?”

“I’m not sure they’d like you to know. But it was Ed Jaffrey and then that boy who’s been living with Walton Forney, oh, what does he call himself, one of those single names like Madonna—Jojo!”

“Well, then,” Sharon began.

“But I’ve heard it from still others,” Avis insisted. “All over town—it’s in the air. Couldn’t you and Frank do something about it, if it’s not true?”

“*If*,” Sharon protested, and her thrust of impatience carried, when she put down the receiver, into her conversation with Frank. “Avis says you’re supposed to have run off with your homosexual lover.”

“I don’t have a homosexual lover,” Frank said, too calmly, ripping an auction ad out of the magazine.

“She says all New York says you do.”

“Well, what are you going to believe, all New York or your own experience? Here I sit, faithful to a fault, straight as a die, whatever that means. We made love just two nights ago.”

It seemed possibly revealing to her that he so distinctly remembered, as if heterosexual performance were a duty he checked off. He was—had always been, ever since she had met him—a slim blond man several inches under six feet tall, with a narrow head he liked to keep trim, even in those years when long hair was in fashion, and frosty blue eyes set at a slight tilt, such as you see on certain taut Slavic or Norwegian faces, and a small precise mouth he kept pursed over teeth a shade too prominent and yellow. He was reluctant to smile, let alone laugh. He was vain of his flat belly and lithe collegiate condition; he weighed himself every morning on the bathroom scale and, if he weighed a pound more than yesterday, skipped lunch. In this, and in his general attention to his own person, he was as quietly fanatic as—it for the first time occurred to her—a woman.

“You know I’ve never liked the queer side of this business,” he went on. “I’ve just gotten used to it. I don’t even think any more, who’s gay and who isn’t.”

“Avis was *ju*bilant,” Sharon said. “How *could* she think it?”

It took him a moment to focus on the question, and realize that his answer was important to her. He became nettled. “Ask *her* how,” he said. “Our brief and regrettable relationship, if that’s what interests you, seemed satisfactory to me at least. I mean, the moving parts all functioned. What troubles and amazes me, if I may say so, is how *you* can be taking this ridiculous rumor so seriously.”

“I’m *not*, Frank,” she insisted, and then backtracked. “But why would such a rumor come out of thin air? Doesn’t there have to be something? Since we moved up here, we’re not together so much, naturally; some days when I can’t come into town you’re gone sixteen hours.…”

“But, *Sharon*,” he said, like a teacher restoring discipline, removing his reading glasses from his almond-shaped eyes, with their stubby fair lashes. “Don’t you *know* me? Ever since that time after the dance when we parked by the river? How old were you? Seventeen?”

She didn’t want to reminisce. Their early sex had been difficult for her; she had submitted to his advances out of a larger, more social, rather idealistic attraction: she knew that together they would have the strength to get out of Cincinnati and, singly, or married to others, they would stay. “Well,” she said, enjoying this sensation, despite the chill the rumor had awakened in her, of descending with Frank to a deeper level of intimacy than usual, “how well do you know even your own spouse? People are fooled all the time. Peggy Jacobson, for instance, when Henry ran off with the au pair, couldn’t believe, even when the evidence was right there in front of her—”

“I’m *deeply* insulted,” Frank interrupted, his mouth tense in that way of his when making a joke but not wanting to show his teeth. “My masculinity is insulted.” But he couldn’t deny himself a downward glance into his magazine; his tidy white hand jerked, as if wanting to tear out yet another item that might be useful to their business. Intimacy had always made him nervous. She kept at it. “Avis said two separate people had solemnly assured her.”

“Who, exactly?”

When she told him, he said, just as she had done, “Well, then.” He added, “You know how gays are. Malicious. Mischievous. They have all that time and money on their hands.”

“You sound jealous.” Something about the way he was arguing with her strengthened Sharon’s suspicion that, outrageous as the rumor was—indeed, *because* it was outrageous—it was true.

In the days that followed, now that Sharon was alert to the rumor’s vaporous presence, she imagined it everywhere—on the poised young faces of their staff, in the delicate negotiatory accents of their artists’ agents, in the heartier tones of their repeat customers, even in the gruff, self-preoccupied ramblings of the artists themselves. People seemed startled when she and Frank entered a room together: the desk receptionist and the security guard in their gallery halted their daily morning banter, and the waiters in their pet restaurant, over on 59th Street, appeared especially effusive and attentive. Handshakes lasted a second too long; women embraced her with an extra squeeze; she felt herself ensnared in a net of unspoken pity.

Frank sensed her discomfort and took a certain malicious pleasure in it, enacting all the while his perfect innocence. He composed himself to appear, from her angle, aloof above the rumor. Dealing professionally in so much absurdity—the art world’s frantic attention-getting grotesquerie—he merely intensified the fastidious dryness that had sustained their gallery through wave after wave of changing fashion, and that had, like a rocket’s heat-resistant skin, insulated their launch, their escape from the comfortable riverine smugness of semi-Southern, puritanical Cincinnati to this capital of dreadful freedom. The rumor amused him, and it amused him, too, to notice how she helplessly watched to see if in the metropolitan throngs his eyes now followed young men as once they had noticed and followed young women. She observed his gestures—always a bit excessively graceful and precise—distrustfully, and listened for the buttery, reedy tone of voice that might signal an invisible sex change.

That she even in some small fraction of her was willing to believe the rumor justified a certain maliciousness on his part. He couldn’t help teasing her—glancing over at her, say, when an especially lithe and magnetic young waiter served them, or, at home, in their bedroom, pushing more brusquely than was his style at her increasing sexual unwillingness. At last away from the countless knowing eyes of their New York milieu, in the privacy of their Hastings upstairs, beneath the wide Midwestern eaves, she would on occasion burst into tears and strike out at him, at his infuriating impervious apparent blamelessness. He was like one of those photorealist nudes, merciless in every detail and yet subtly, defiantly not there, not human. “You’re distant,” she accused him. “You’ve always been.”

“I don’t mean to be. Sharon, you didn’t use to mind my manner. You thought it was quietly masterful.”

“I was a teenaged girl. I deferred to you.”

“It worked out,” he pointed out, lifting his hands in an effete, disclaiming way to indicate their large bedroom, their expensive house, their joint career. “What is it that bothers you, my dear? The idea of losing me? Or the insult to your female pride? The people who started this ridiculous rumor don’t even *see* women—women to them are just background noise.”

“It’s *not* ridiculous—if it were, why does it keep on and on, even though we’re seen together all the time?”

For, ostensibly to quiet her, and to quench the rumor, he had all but ceased to go to the city alone, and took her with him even though it meant some neglect of the house and their still-growing sons.

Frank asked, “Who *says* it keeps on all the time? I’ve *never* heard it, never once, except from you. Who’s mentioned it lately?”

“Nobody.”

“Well, then.” He smiled, his lips not quite parting on his curved teeth, tawny like a beaver’s.

“You bastard!” Sharon burst out. “You have some stinking little secret!”

“I don’t,” he serenely half-lied.

The rumor had no factual basis. But might there be, Frank asked himself, some truth to it after all? Not circumstantial truth, but some higher, inner truth? As a young man, slight of build, with artistic interests, had he not been fearful of being mistaken for a homosexual? Had he not responded to homosexual overtures as they arose, in bars and locker rooms, with a disproportionate terror and repugnance? Had not his early marriage, and then, ten years later, his flurry of adulterous womanizing, been an escape of sorts, into safe, socially approved terrain? When he fantasized, or saw a pornographic movie, was not the male organ the hero of the occasion for him, at the center of every scene? Were not those slavish, lapping, sucking starlets his robotlike delegates, with glazed eyes and undisturbed coiffures venturing where he did not dare? Did he not, perhaps, envy women their privilege of worshipping the phallus? And did he not, when the doctor gave him his annual prostate exam with a greased finger, have to fight getting an erection, right there in a passive curled position on the examining table? But, Frank further asked himself, in fairness arguing both sides of the case, can homosexual strands be entirely disentangled from heterosexual in that pink muck of carnal excitement, of dream made flesh, of return to the pre-sexual womb?

More broadly, had he not felt more comfortable with his father than with his mother? Was not this in itself a sinister reversal of the usual biology? His father had been a genteel Fourth Street lawyer, of no particular effectuality save that most of his clients were from the same social class, with the same accents and comfortably narrowed aspirations, here on this plateau by the swelling Ohio. Darker and taller than Frank, with the same long teeth and primly set mouth, his father had had the lawyer’s gift of silence, of judicious withholding, and in his son’s scattered memories of times together—a trip downtown in the Packard to buy Frank his first suit, each summer’s one or two excursions to see the Reds play at old Crosley Field—the man said little; but this prim reserve, letting so much go unstated and unacknowledged, was a relief, after the daily shower of words and affection and advice that Frank received from his mother. As an adult he was attracted, he had noticed, to stoical men, taller than he, gravely sealed around an unexpressed sadness. His favorite college roommate had been of this saturnine type, and his pet tennis partner in Hastings, and artists he especially favored and encouraged—dour, weathered landscapists and virtually illiterate sculptors, welded solid into their crafts and stubborn obsessions. With these men he became a catering, wifely, subtly agitated presence that Sharon would scarcely recognize.

Frank’s mother, once a fluffy belle from Louisville, had been gaudy, strident, sardonic, volatile, needy, demanding, loving; from her he had inherited his “artistic” side, as well as his blondness and “interesting” almond-shaped eyes, but he was not especially grateful. Less—as was proposed by a famous formula he didn’t know as a boy—would have been more. His mother had given him an impression of women as complex, brightly colored traps, attractive but treacherous, their petals apt to harden in an instant into knives. A certain wistful passivity had drawn him to Sharon and, after the initial dazzlement of the Avises of the world faded and fizzled, always drew him back. Other women asked more than he could provide; he was aware of other, bigger, hotter men they had had. But with Sharon he had been a rescuer; he had slain the dragon of the Ohio; he had got her out of Cincinnati. What more devastatingly, and less forgivably, confirmed the rumor’s essential truth than the willingness of the one who knew him best and owed him most to entertain it? Sharon’s instinct had been to believe Avis even though, far from running off, he was sitting there right in front of her eyes.

He was unreal to her, he could not help but conclude: all those years of cohabitation and husbandly service were now thanklessly dismissed because of an apparition, a shadow of gossip. On the other hand, now that the rumor existed, Frank had become more real in the eyes of José, the younger, slier of the two security guards, whose daily greetings had subtly moved beyond the perfunctory; a certain mischievous dance in the boy’s velvety features had come to enrich their employer-employee courtesies. And Jennifer, too, the severely beautiful receptionist, with her neo-hippie bangs and shawls and serapes, now treated him more relaxedly, even offhandedly. She assumed with him a comradely slanginess—“The boss was in earlier but she went out to exchange something at Bergdorf’s”—as if both he and she were in roughly parallel bondage to “the boss.” Frank’s heart felt a reflex of loyalty to Sharon, a single sharp beat, but then he, too, relaxed, as if his phantom male lover and the weightless life he led with him in some nonexistent apartment had bestowed at last what the city had withheld from the overworked, child-burdened married couple who had arrived fifteen years ago—a halo of glamour, of debonair mystery.

In Hastings, when he and his wife attended a suburban party, the effect was less flattering. The other couples, he imagined, were slightly unsettled by the Whittiers’ stubbornly appearing together, and became disjointed in their presence, the men drifting off in distaste, the women turning supernormal and laying up a chinkless wall of conversation about children’s college applications, local zoning, and Wall Street layoffs. The women, it seemed to Frank, edged, with an instinctive animal movement, a few inches closer to Sharon and touched her with a deft, protective flicking on the shoulder or forearm, to express solidarity and sympathy.

Wes Robertson, Frank’s favorite tennis partner, came over to him and grunted, “How’s it going?”

“*Fine*,” Frank gushed, staring up at Wes with what he hoped weren’t unduly starry eyes. Wes, who had recently turned fifty, had an old motorcycle-accident scar on one side of his chin, a small pale rose of discoloration, which seemed to concentrate the man’s self-careless manliness. Frank gave him more of an answer than he might have wanted: “In the art game we’re feeling the slowdown like everybody else, but the Japanese are keeping the roof from caving in. The trouble with the Japanese, though, is, from the standpoint of a personal gallery like ours, they aren’t adventurous—they want blue chips, they want guaranteed value, they can’t grasp that in art value has to be subjective to an extent. Look at their own stuff—it’s all standardized. Who the hell but the experts can tell a Hiroshige from a Hokusai? When you think about it, their whole society, their whole success really, is based on everybody being alike, everybody agreeing. The notion of art as an individualistic struggle, a gamble, as the dynamic embodiment of an existential problem—they just don’t get it.” He was talking too much, he knew, but he couldn’t help it; Wes’s scowling presence, his melancholy scarred face and stringy alcoholic body, which nevertheless could still whip a backhand right across the forecourt, perversely excited Frank, made him want to flirt.

Wes grimaced and contemplated Frank glumly. “Be around for a game Sunday?” Meaning, had he really run off?

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?” This was teasing the issue, and Frank tried to sober up, to rein in. He felt a flush on his face, and a stammer coming on. He asked, “The usual hour? Ten-forty-five, more or less?”

Wes nodded. “Sure.”

Frank chattered on: “Let’s try to get Court Four this time. Those brats having their lessons on Court One drove me crazy last time. We had to keep retrieving their damn balls. And listening to their moronic chatter.”

Wes didn’t grant this attempt at evocation of past liaisons even a word, just continued his melancholy, stoical nodding. This was one of the things, it occurred to Frank, that he liked about men: their relational minimalism, their gender-based realization that the cupboard of life, emotionally speaking, was pretty near bare. There wasn’t that tireless, irksome, bright-eyed *hope* women kept fluttering at you.

Once, years ago, on a stag golfing trip to Portugal, he and Wes had shared a room, with two single beds, and Wes had fallen asleep within a minute and started snoring, keeping Frank awake for much of the night. Contemplating the unconscious male body on its moonlit bed, Frank had been struck by the tragic dignity of this supine form, like a stone knight eroding on a tomb—the snoring profile in motionless gray silhouette, the massive, scarred warrior weight helpless as his breathing struggled from phase to phase of the sleep cycle—from deep to REM to a near-wakefulness that brought a few merciful minutes of silence. The next morning, Wes said Frank should have reached over and poked him in the side; that’s what his wife did. But he wasn’t his wife, Frank thought, though he had felt, in the course of that night’s ordeal, his heart make many curious motions, among them the heaving, all but impossible effort women’s hearts make in overcoming men’s heavy grayness and achieving—a rainbow born of drizzle—love.

At the opening of Ned Forschheimer’s show—Forschheimer, a shy, rude, stubborn, and now elderly painter of tea-colored, wintry Connecticut landscapes, was one of the Whittier Gallery’s pets, unfashionable yet sneakily sellable—none other than Walton Forney came up to Frank, his round face lit by white wine and his odd unquenchable self-delight, and said, “Say, Frank old boy. Methinks I owe you an apology. It was Charlie Whit*field*, who used to run that framing shop down on Eighth Street, who left his wife suddenly, with some little Guatemalan boy he was putting through CCNY on the side. They took off for Mexico and left the missus sitting with the shop mortgaged up to its attic and about a hundred prints of wild ducks left unframed. The thing that must have confused me, Charlie came from Ohio, too—Columbus or Cleveland, one of those. I knew it began with a C. It was, what do they call it, a Freudian slip, an understandable confusion. Avis Wasserman told me Sharon wasn’t all that thrilled to get the word a while ago, and you must have wondered yourself what the hell was up.”

“We ignored it,” Frank said, in a voice firmer and less catering than his usual one. “We rose above it.” Walton was a number of inches shorter than Frank, with yet a bigger head; his gleaming, thin-skinned face, bearing smooth jowls that had climbed into his sideburns, was shadowed blue here and there, like the moon. His bruised and powdered look somehow went with his small spaced teeth and the horizontal red tracks his glasses had left in the fat in front of his ears.

The man gazed at Frank with a gleaming, sagging lower lip, his nearsighted eyes trying to assess the damage, the depth of the grudge. “Well, *mea culpa, mea culpa*, I guess, though I *didn’t* tell Jojo and that *poisonous* Ed Jaffrey to go blabbing it all over town.”

“Well, Wally, thanks for filling me in,” Frank said resonantly. Depending on what type of man he was with, Frank felt large and straight and sonorous or, as with Wes, gracile and flighty. Sharon, scenting blood amid the vacuous burble of the party, pushed herself through the crowd and joined them. Frank quickly told her, “Wally just confessed to me he started the rumor because Charlie Whitfield downtown, who *did* run off with somebody, came from Ohio, too. Toledo, as I remember.”

“I said Cleveland or Columbus,” Wally murmured, not sure Frank was being satirical.

Sharon asked, “What rumor, honey?”

Frank blushed. “You know, the one that said I ran off with a boy.”

“Oh, *that* rumor,” Sharon said, blinking once, as if her party mascara were sticking. “I’d totally forgotten it. Who could believe it,” she asked Wally, “of Frank?”

“Everybody, evidently,” Frank said. It was possible, given the strange willful ways of women, that she *had* forgotten it, even while he had been brooding over its possible justice. If the rumor were truly quenched—and Walton would undoubtedly tell the story of his “Freudian slip” around town, as a self-promoting joke on himself—Frank would feel diminished. He would feel emasculated, if his wife no longer thought he had a secret.

Yet that night, at the party, Walton Forney’s Jojo came up to him. He seemed, despite an earring the size of a faucet washer and a magenta stripe in the center of his “rise” hairdo, unexpectedly intelligent and low-key, offering, not in so many words, a kind of apology, and praising the tea-colored landscapes being offered for sale. “I’ve been thinking, in my own work, of going, you know, more traditional. You get this feeling of, like, a dead end with total abstraction.” The boy had a bony, humorless face, with a silvery line of a scar under one eye, and seemed uncertain in manner, hesitant, as if he had reached a point in life where he needed direction. That fat fool Forney could certainly not provide direction, and it pleased Frank to imagine that Jojo was beginning to realize it.

“All that abstract-expressionist fuss about *paint*,” he told the boy. “A person looking at a Rembrandt knows he’s looking at *paint*. The question is, What *else* is he looking at?”

As he and Sharon drove home together along the Hudson, the car felt close; the heater fan blew oppressively, parchingly. “*You* were willing to believe it at first,” he reminded her.

“Well, Avis seemed so definite. But you convinced me.”

“How?”

She placed her hand high on his thigh and dug her fingers in, annoyingly, infuriatingly. “*You* know,” she said, in a lower register, meant to be sexy, but almost inaudible over the roar of the heater fan. The Hudson glowered far beneath them, like the dark Ohio when he used to drive her home from a date across the river in honky-tonk Kentucky.

“That could be mere performance,” he warned her. “Women are fooled that way all the time.”

“Who says?”

“Everybody. Books. Proust. People aren’t that simple.”

“They’re simple enough,” Sharon said, in a neutral, defensive tone, removing her hand.

“If you say so, my dear,” Frank said, somewhat stoically, his mind drifting. That silvery line of a scar under Jojo’s left eye … lean long muscles snugly wrapped in white skin … lofts with a Spartan, masculine tang to their spaces … Hellenic fellowship, exercise machines … direct negotiations, between equals … no more dealing with this pathetic, maddening race of *others …*

The rumor might be dead in the world, but in him it had come alive.