# Baby’s First Step

# John Updike

Glenn Morrissey had been an utterly faithful husband until, at the age of thirty-six, he broke his leg playing touch football on the Mall in Washington, D.C., where he lived, as a lawyer employed by the Bureau of Weights and Measures. A heavy young black man had been standing on the sidelines, watching the scrimmage of lawyers and lobbyists and bureaucrats who each fall Sunday assembled down near the Hirshhorn for their afternoon tussle, and since he seemed to be alone, and the sides were uneven, he was invited to play. Assigned to cover Glenn on an out-and-in buttonhook pass pattern, he slipped on the soft earth in changing direction and fell against Glenn’s braced leg as the ball spiralled toward them. Glenn heard the bone pop—a muscle-muffled *snap*. But the young black picked himself up and scrambled back to the defensive huddle without even an apology, and it took a while for the other players to believe that Glenn, still lying there astonished, was truly injured and could no longer play. He hopped off the field and induced a close friend, Bud Jorgenson, a red-bearded specialist in ethnic art for the Smithsonian Institution, to help him hop the two blocks down 7th Street to his parked car. Glenn drove it back one-footed to his home in Adams-Morgan, a neo-colonial of powdery brick with a sideways view of Rock Creek Park. His wife, Stacey, was out back, giving the roses their fall pruning; she laughed when she saw him hopping toward her and heard his aggrieved voice cry out, “Look what those bad boys did to me!” It was only an hour later, after a trip to Sibley Memorial Hospital and a reading of his X-rays, that she took his injury seriously. His right tibia had been fractured vertically, splitting off the exterior tuberosity, with a messy involvement of the interosseous cartilage that would necessitate an operation, a week in the hospital, and three months in a cast.

Still, Glenn didn’t consciously hold Stacey’s underreaction against her—she was right; he was a boyish hypochondriac who had cried wolf too often—or the fact that that very night, with him settled and doped in his hospital bed, she went alone to a cocktail party at the Romanian Embassy, where the hors d’oeuvres were famously lavish. He no more had it in him to blame his wife for anything than he would blame himself; he knew her from the inside out—every motive, every reaction—just as he knew himself. In fact, he found her *more* predictable than he did his own self, which still had some depths and twists that took him unawares. You land, it seemed to him, on the shore of your own being in total innocence, like an explorer who was looking for something else, and it takes decades to penetrate inland and map the mountain passes and trace the rivers to their sources. Even then, there are large blanks, where monsters roam.

Being hospitalized, for the first time in his life—measuring out in pills his capacity for pain, sleeping on his back, submitting his most intimate functions to the care and scrutiny of nurses, learning shamelessness and becoming intensely, solicitously conscious of his own body, as well as doing all the forced entertaining, of doctors and visitors, that a hospital patient must do—opened up a new side of his being, a new stretch of potential. He took it all pretty well, was his verdict on himself. He was less of a sissy than he had thought. And then he endured being on crutches, having to carry his papers and possessions in a canvas tote bag while keeping his grip on the sponge-wrapped rungs of the crutches as he levered himself up and down stairs. He compressed, as it were, his physical activity, at home and the office, into a restricted yet still-effective mold—a smaller, more considered version of his previous life, which had been lived without proper appreciation of the miraculous powers of his body.

The late-winter day came when his orthopedist removed the last of a series of gray, itchy, odorous, scribbled-upon casts and pronounced him whole again. Glenn could hardly believe, even though he had taken a few experimental steps in the doctor’s office, that he was free to walk on no more support than his own fallible bones. He felt, without the crutches, dizzyingly tall, and oddly vaporous below the waist. He was floating, he was gliding, and when he stepped into the waiting room he thought the other patients were looking up at him as if at a man on stilts. “Baby’s first step,” he joked, to a woman whose stare seemed especially nonplussed. But her expression remained stupid, and he realized that she didn’t see anything extraordinary about him—just a man walking on his own two legs, as most men do.

That night, he and Stacey had a dinner party to attend, at the home of one of the bureau’s chief calibrators; as Glenn stepped into the house he seemed still to be miraculously gliding, like Fred Astaire across a polished ballroom floor. He kissed his hostess with particular warmth; he was back among the living, the ambulatory. The party seemed to be his coming-out party, and he the belle of the evening, to whom everything, as to Shakespeare’s Miranda, was new. The unknown woman in finespun metallic red sitting next to him at the dinner table was, he realized, alive just as he was; her thorax held the same complex of arteries and veins pounding with blood, clean and unclean, bluish and bright.

“Do I know you?” he asked her, sliding into his chair.

“We met in the living room.” Her smile was dazzling, in a lipstick that also seemed metallic. “I’m the wife of your host’s brother. My husband and I live in the Midwest.”

“The Midwest’s a big place.”

Vast areas seemed to lie all about him, waiting to be explored. This woman contained patches of ambivalence and vacancy, he realized. We all hold uncertainties yearning to be clarified. There is more play in the human situation than he in his old innocence had dreamed.

“The Minneapolis–St. Paul area,” she said.

“Twin Cities,” he said, pleased with himself. “I love the way people from there pronounce it—so quickly, all those syllables. How do you stand the winters?”

“We go underground. We have skyways. Our feet never touch the snow.”

There was a sparkle, a shimmer, to the skin of her face, its microscopic epidermal grain, as well as to her red dress and her lipstick. Even the transparent fuzz on her upper lip sparkled as it lifted in the tension of a smile. He felt her rising to the challenge his inner space presented to her; she somehow sensed, Glenn was convinced, his recent initiation, via suffering, into a freemasonry of human exploration and exchange. Their conversation, as the courses came and went by candlelight and the wine glasses were rhythmically refilled, became so heated that they had to keep reminding themselves to turn to the dinner partner on their other side, for courtesy’s sake. Her knee momentarily rested against his healed knee without apparent awareness; to emphasize a point she smartly tapped the back of his hand. How delightful she was, how wonderfully quick to perceive and respond, to parry and thrust! As they sat side by side at the dining table, Glenn kept picturing their two chests full of pumping blood, two barrels brimming with mystery.

“Are you in Washington for long?”

“The National Gallery and all those others—I could be happy here forever! But I must fly back tomorrow, on United at eleven-forty. My husband is going on to New York on business first thing in the morning. Our twelve-year-old daughter takes riding lessons and is doing dressage in a show and would never forgive me if I weren’t there. She’d be in psychoanalysis forever. You know how it is—one of those moments that won’t come again.”

“I know,” he said, not sure, in his rapture with her, that he did.

The next day, on the excuse of some research at the Library of Congress, he took a taxi to National Airport to see his dinner-mate off. Dressed in a trim travelling suit, carrying a small navy-blue overnight bag whose many-compartmented capacity was left limp by her gossamer party clothes, she did not seem surprised to see him. In the human clutter of the obsolescing old airport, with its spaces and shops like those of a railroad terminal, and its traffic of robed and sandalled visitors from all points of the globe, they walked back and forth, Glenn still marvelling at the ease with which his healed leg carried him. With every step, he seemed to be floating. The caged volume of her chest hung beside his; they had their arms about each other’s waists like teenagers lounging back from the beach. As they walked, he carried her bag, which seemed weightless, and she talked about her children’s activities—the girl’s equestrian lessons, and the two boys’ hockey practices, which took place at ungodly hours at a distant rink. “The sacrifices one makes! But you *must*, because some day they will be gone.” The message was clear: she was committed, her life was a thousand miles away. The lapel of her travelling suit held a small brooch of cloisonné enamel, like a badge of membership in a society whose insignia he could not quite make out. The club of secret dissatisfaction.

He thought of kissing her, but here, in this international clutter, this traffic, it would have been awkward; it was enough to have her head beside his shoulder, so close he could smell on her the morning dew of her face lotion. She was nervous about missing the plane, and he should be back in his office. At the first boarding call, they reported to her gate; he passed her feather-light suitcase into her hand; they hugged, pressing their chests together; he bent his face to her shoulder and kissed the padded cloth. “Will you forget me?” she asked hurriedly in his ear, in a voice gone husky.

“Why would I do that?”

“You’ll have all those others.”

“What others?” he asked.

“You’ll see.” Adroitly she backed off and melted into the boarding line; Glenn missed some of the expressive nuances of her darting, apologetic farewell gestures, for his eyes, amazingly, had mustered tears. More gratifying still, in the few seconds of their embrace he had felt behind his fly the furtive pang of an erection commencing, the tingling throb of the areolar spaces embarking upon engorgement. He was alive, he was full of passion—a barrel waiting to be tapped.

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They never met again; she had been a false dawn. Perhaps every major campaign in life needs a false start, a dry run, a resetting of the compass. Riding lessons in Minneapolis were a mere obstructive detail; the possibilities had been established. In the carnival of Washington, with its constant demonstrations, its litter of yesterday’s placards, its picketing maniacs and widespread dangerous neighborhoods, there is room for romance and anarchic adventure. All those women, the wives underemployed and the employed women usually single, and all those demure side streets, frothy with flowering azalea and cherry, and the constant parties, and the seething of political gossip, of discontent, of official turnover and hoped-for advancement. War is a well-known aphrodisiac, and Washington is always at war. As the men rise and fall on the ladders of power, women are stimulated to take chances. The touch of Southern indolence in the air helps. Los Angeles and New York, by comparison, are too much in love with work—sex, like lunch, is tightly harnessed to business.

Stacey’s best friend was a similarly lean, attractive, exercise- and cause-conscious mother of two, named Andrea Jorgenson. Bud was her husband; he travelled to third-world countries for the Smithsonian, bringing back sculptures made mostly, it seemed, of hair and straw. Andrea had appeared to Glenn rather opaque and standardized hitherto; now, as he turned upon her the powerful beam of his new knowledge—we are all full of warm darkness, unformed and inquisitive—her bones began to glow. It was a simple series of knight’s moves, on the skewed chessboard of L’Enfant’s city plan, to give her his ear at a party or two (his head bowed like that of a doctor listening to her heartbeat with a stethoscope), and then to indicate with a minute pressure of his hand during a fund-raising ball that a certain unspoken path was open, and then to suggest that, now that her children were both in boarding school and she was working toward a Ph.D. at Georgetown University, she write a paper, with his help, on the failure of metrication in the United States. From there it was just a few pushed pawns to lunches *à deux* downtown, and finally to his afternoon infiltration of her home and occupation of her bed. Bud was off in Mali and Chad, dodging civil wars.

Glenn had been in the Jorgensons’ house in Woodley Park many times, as a married guest of the couple, but had never seen it in the quiet of the day, as a possessor of sorts. These chairs and tables, curtains and rugs had all been selected and tended by a sensibility akin to Stacey’s yet distinctly other. The bathroom had little beribboned jars of potpourri set about, and pink toilet paper with a quilted texture, and a padded seat to match, and a long-handled brush and a loofah on the sill where the bathtub met the tiles, so he felt invited to picture Andrea scrubbing and buffing herself to a subepithelial rosiness, within a sloshing pond of suds. The tub and sink were of some black substance like polished slate or lava, and large mirrors here and there made the sight of one’s naked body unavoidable. Andrea was a closet sybarite, just as Stacey was a closet ascetic, though, seeing the two women side by side at a lunch table, one would think them identical.

Andrea fancied not the prim pastel bed linen Stacey preferred but splashy hot-colored floral patterns. She provided, once, in his honor, purple satin sheets, which were disconcertingly slippery; the pillows squirted out from under their bodies like greased pigs. On the walls, even in the bedroom, hairy, hollow-eyed masks stared down, and on bookshelves and tabletops carved fertility symbols thrust buttocks in one direction and breasts in the other. The violence of the African artifacts made Glenn slightly uncomfortable. Andrea’s absent husband seemed to be present in them, staring through the eye-holes of grimacing masks.

Strange to say, part of the pleasure of Andrea’s house was leaving it behind. Glenn would slip out the back door, stride quickly, purposefully along the side of the house like a meter reader up from the basement, and, with relaxing breath, walk the slant sidewalk to his car, parked for discretion’s sake in the next block of hushed Washington homes—their gables politely looking the other way, their neo-classic porchlets void of daytime visitors, their walls of powdery or painted brick and plantings both lush and trimmed all conspiring with him to keep his secret, as he, a white man in a business suit, exercised his American right to walk wherever he wished.

One day after three months of such visits, he must have, in his post-coital relaxation, confided something admiring about the décor, because Andrea said, with a jarring vehemence, “God, if Bud brings back one more Ashanti fertility doll or Bambara antelope headdress, I think I’ll scream. I honestly think I might leave him if he gets any more African.”

Glenn was jarred because he wanted to think that Andrea’s marriage, like his own, was basically happy. “Really?”

“Really. What I’m *really* scared he’s going to bring back from these trips is AIDS. The whole continent is lousy with it. I’m terrified of sleeping with him.”

“But—do you think he …?”

He didn’t finish; she snorted at his delicacy. “People do,” she said, her angry gesture taking in their naked bodies, on the wrinkled sheet, with its dangerous-looking pattern of red roses and green thorns. “It’s human nature, darling.”

“You know, that didn’t come home to me until I broke my leg last year.” He went on, as if selling her husband back to her, “Bud was so nice that day; he was the only one who cared. Not even Stacey cared.” The accident had happened in the fall; this was May, on the verge of uncomfortable summer heat; soon, people would be leaving the District for the mountains, for the shore. “Where would you go if you left him?”

The question was idle, but her answer was not. Andrea propped herself up on an elbow to give it. Though they had closed the Venetian blinds, the bedroom was still bright, the sharp spring sunlight clamoring at the windows like a noisy pack of children. Her face—her fine, lean, well-cared-for face, whereon sun and chronic social animation had engraved tiny wrinkles, at the corners of her eyes and mouth—confronted him with that female openness and depth of interrogation which remind men of the dark, of the ocean, of the night sky, of everything swallowing and terminating. But her manner of speaking was girlish, embarrassed, offhand. “With you somewhere?” She primly wrapped the top of the sheet around her breasts and settled her mussed fair head back on the pillow to hear his answer.

Again, there was a muffled *snap*. He had entered more new territory, barren stretches of disappointment and recrimination, under skies gray with tears. He tried to picture it—her in a house of his, them in a house of theirs—and couldn’t. What he liked possessing was a woman’s accoutrements—her clothes, her blue overnight bag, her distant daughter’s riding lessons, her husband’s appointment calendar, her exotic black-tubbed bathroom, her entire *nest*. What he wanted was for women to stay put, planted in American plenty, while he ambulated from one to another carrying no more baggage than the suit on his back and the car keys in his pocket. In the years to come, long after Andrea had sunk back angrily into her nest of roses and hairy masks, Glenn experienced a lightheaded bliss whenever his feet glided across an illicit threshold, on what felt like stilts.