# Trust Me

# John Updike

WHEN HAROLD was three or four, his father and mother took him to a swimming pool. This was strange, for his family rarely went places, except to the movie house two blocks from their house. Harold had no memory of ever seeing his parents in bathing suits again, after this unhappy day. What he did remember was this:

His father, nearly naked, was in the pool, treading water. Harold was standing shivering on the wet tile edge, suspended above the abysmal odor of chlorine, hypnotized by the bright, lapping agitation of this great volume of unnaturally blue-green water. His mother, in a black bathing suit that made her flesh appear very white, was off in a corner of his mind. His father was asking him to jump. “C’mon, Hassy, jump,” he was saying, in his mild, encouraging voice. “It’ll be all right. Jump right into my hands.” The words echoed in the flat acoustics of the water and tile and sunlight, heightening Harold’s sense of exposure, his awareness of his own white skin. His father seemed eerily stable and calm in the water, and the child idly wondered, as he jumped, what the man was standing on.

Then the blue-green water was all around him, dense and churning, and when he tried to take a breath a fist was shoved into his throat. He saw his own bubbles rising in front of his face, a multitude of them, rising as he sank; he sank it seemed for a very long time, until something located him in the darkening element and seized him by the arm.

He was in air again, on his father’s shoulder, still fighting for breath. They were out of the pool. His mother swiftly came up to the two of them and, with a deftness remarkable in one so angry, slapped his father on the face, loudly, next to Harold’s ear. The slap seemed to resonate all over the pool area, and to be heard by all the other bathers; but perhaps this was the acoustics of memory. His sense of public embarrassment amid sparkling nakedness—of every strange face turned toward him as he passed from his father’s wet arms into his mother’s dry ones—survived his recovery of breath. His mother’s anger seemed directed at him as much as at his father. His feet now were on grass. Standing wrapped in a towel near his mother’s knees while the last burning fragments of water were coughed from his lungs, Harold felt eternally disgraced.

He never knew what had happened; by the time he asked, so many years had passed that his father had forgotten. “Wasn’t that a crying shame,” the old man said, with his mild mixture of mournfulness and comedy. “Sink or swim, and you sank.” Perhaps Harold had leaped a moment before it was expected, or had proved unexpectedly heavy, and had thus slipped through his father’s grasp. Unaccountably, all through his growing up he continued to trust his father; it was his mother he distrusted, her swift sure-handed anger.

He didn’t learn to swim until college, and even then he passed the test by frog-kicking the length of the pool on his back, with the instructor brandishing a thick stick to grasp if he panicked and began to sink. The chemical scent of a pool always frightened him: blue-green dragon breath.

His children, raised in an amphibious world of summer camps and country clubs, easily became swimmers. They tried to teach him how to dive. “You must keep your head *down*, Dad. That’s why you keep getting belly-whoppers.”

“I’m scared of not coming up,” he confessed. What he especially did not like, under water, was the sight of bubbles rising around his face.

His first wife dreaded flying. Yet they flew a great deal. “Either that,” he told her, “or resign from the twentieth century.” They flew to California, and while they were there two planes collided over the Grand Canyon. They flew out of Boston the day after starlings had blocked the engines of an Electra and caused it to crash into the harbor with such force that people were cut in two by their safety belts. They flew over Africa, crossing the equator at night, the land beneath them an inky chasm lit by a few sparks of tribal fire. They landed on dusty runways, with the cabin doors banging. He promised her, her fear was so acute, that she would never have to fly with him again. At last, their final African flight took them up from the Ethiopian Plateau, across the pale width of the Libyan Desert, to the edge of the Mediterranean, and on to Rome.

The Pan Am plane out of Rome was the most comforting possible—a jumbo jet wide as a house, stocked with American magazines and snacks, its walls dribbling music, with only a few passengers. The great plane lifted off, and he relaxed into a *Newsweek*, into the prospect of a meal, a nap, and a homecoming. Harold’s wife asked, after ten minutes, “Why aren’t we climbing?”

He looked out of the window, and it was true—the watery world below them was not diminishing; he could distinctly see small boats and the white tips of breaking waves. The stewardesses were moving up and down the aisle with unusual speed, with unusual expressions on their glamorous faces. Harold looked at the palms of his hands; they had become damp and mottled, as during nausea. However hard he stared, the sea beneath the wings did not fall away. Sun sparkled on its surface; a tiny sailboat tacked.

The pilot’s voice crackled into being above them. “Folks, there’s a little warning light come on for one of our starboard engines, and in conformance with our policy of absolute security we’re going to circle around and return to the Rome airport.”

During the bank and return, which seemed to take an extremely long time, the stewardesses buckled themselves into rear seats, the man across the aisle kept reading *L’Osservatore*, and Harold’s wife, a faithful student of safety instructions, removed her high-heeled shoes and took the pins out of her hair. So again he marvelled at the deft dynamism of women in crises.

He held her damp hand in his and steadily gazed out of the window, pressing the sea down with his vision, stiff-arming it with his will to live. If he blinked, they would fall. One little boat at a time, the plane edged back to Rome. The blue sea visually interlocked with the calm silver edge of the wing: Olympian surfaces serenely oblivious of the immense tension between them. He had often felt, through one of these scratched oval windows, something falsely reassuring in the elaborate order of the rivets pinning the aluminum sheets together. *Trust me*, the metallic code spelled out; in his heart Harold, like his wife, had refused, and this refusal in him formed a hollow space terror could always flood.

The 747 landed smoothly back in Rome and, after an hour’s delay, while mechanics persuaded the warning light to go off, resumed the flight to America. At home, their scare became a story, a joke. He kept his promise, though, that she would never have to fly with him again; within a year, they separated.

During the time of separation Harold seemed to be slinging his children from one rooftop to another, silently begging them to trust him. It was as when, years before, he had adjusted his daughter’s braces in her mouth with a needle-nose pliers. She had come to him in pain, a wire gouging the inside of her cheek. But then, with his clumsy fingers in her mouth, her eyes widened with fear of worse pain. He gaily accused her, “You don’t trust me.” The gaiety of his voice revealed a crucial space, a gap between their situations: it would be his blunder, but her pain. Another’s pain is not our own. Religion, he supposed, seeks to close this gap, but each generation’s torturers keep it open. Without it, compassion would crush us; the space of indifference is where we breathe. Harold had heard this necessary indifference in the pilot’s voice drawling “Folks,” and in his father’s voice urging “Jump.” He heard it in his own reassurances as he bestowed them. “Sweetie, I know you’re feeling pressure now, but if you’ll just hold *still …* there’s this little sharp end—oops. Well, you wriggled.”

He took his girl friend to the top of a mountain. Harold hadn’t had a girl friend for many years and had to relearn the delicate blend of protectiveness and challengingness that is courtship. She was, Priscilla, old enough to have her own children, and old enough to feel fragile on skis. She had spent the day on the baby slope, practicing turns and gradually gaining confidence, while Harold ranged far and wide on the mountain, in the company of her children. As the afternoon drew to an end, he swooped down upon her in a smart spray of snow. She begged him, “Ride the baby chair, so I can show you my snowplow.”

“If you can snowplow here, you can come down from the top of the mountain,” Harold told her.

“Really?” Her cheeks were pink, from her day on the baby slope. She wore a white knit hat. Her eyes were baby blue.

“Absolutely. We’ll come down on the novice trail.”

She trusted him. But on the chair lift, as the slope beneath them increased and the windswept iciness of the higher trails became apparent, a tremulous doubt entered into her face, and he realized, with that perversely joyful inner widening the torturer feels, that he had done the wrong thing. The lift rumbled onward, ever higher. “Can I really ski this?” Priscilla asked, with a child’s beautiful willingness to be reassured. In the realms of empathy, he was again standing on the edge of that swimming pool. The evil-smelling water was a long way down.

He told her, “You won’t be skiing this part. Look at the view. It’s gorgeous.”

She turned, rigid in the chair as it swayed across a chasm. With obedient eyes she gazed at the infinite blue-green perspectives of wooded mountain and frozen lake. The parking lot below seemed a little platter tessellated with cars. The lift cable irresistibly slithered; the air dropped in temperature. The pines around them had grown stunted and twisted. Mist licked off the ice; they were in the clouds. Priscilla was trembling all over, and at the top could scarcely stand on her skis.

“I can’t do it,” she announced.

“Do what I do,” Harold said. He quickly slid to a few yards below her. “Put your weight first on one ski, then the other. Don’t look at the steepness, just think of your weight shifting.”

She leaned her weight backward, away from the slope, and fell down. Tears welled in her eyes; he feared they would freeze and make her blind. He gathered all his love into his voice and rolled it toward her, to melt her recalcitrance, her terror. “Just do your snowplow. Don’t think about where you are.”

“There isn’t any snow,” she said. “Just ice.”

“It’s not icy at the edges.”

“There are *trees* at the edges.”

“Come on, honey. The light’s getting flat.”

“We’ll freeze to death.”

“Don’t be silly, the ski patrol dusts the trails last thing. Put your weight on the downhill ski and let yourself turn. You *must*. Goddamn it, it’s *sim*ple.”

“Simple for *you*,” Priscilla said. She followed his directions and began gingerly to slide. She hit a small mogul and fell again. She began to scream. She tried to throw her ski poles, but the straps held them to her wrists. She kicked her feet like an infant in a tantrum, and one ski binding released. “I *hate* you,” she cried. “I can’t do it, I *can’t* do it! I was so *proud* on the baby slope, all I wanted was for you to *watch* me—watch me for one lousy minute, that was all I asked you to do. You *knew* I wasn’t ready for this. *Why* did you bring me up here, *why?*”

“I thought you were,” he said weakly. “Ready. I wanted to show you the view.” His father had wanted to give him the joy of the water, no doubt.

Dusk was coming to the mountain. Teen-aged experts bombed past in an avalanche of heedless color, with occasional curious side-glances. Harold and Priscilla agreed to take off their skis and walk down. It took an hour, and cost him a blister on each heel. The woods around them, perceived at so unusually slow a speed, wore a magical frozen strangeness, the ironical calm of airplane rivets. Her children were waiting at the edge of the emptying parking lot with tears in their eyes. “I tried to give her a treat,” he explained to them, “but your mother doesn’t trust me.”

During this same perilous period, Harold attended his son’s seventeenth birthday party, in the house he had left. As he was rushing to catch the evening train that would take him back to his apartment in the city, he noticed a fresh pan of brownies cooling on the stove. This was odd, because birthday cake had already been served. He asked his son, “What are these?”

The boy smiled cherubically. “Hash brownies. Have one, Dad. You can eat it on the train.”

“It won’t do anything funny to me?”

“Naa. It’s just something the other kids cooked up for me as a joke. It’s more the idea of it; they won’t do anything.”

Harold as a child had had a sweet tooth, a taste for starch; he took one of the bigger of the brownies and gobbled it in the car as his son drove him to the railroad station. In the train, he leaned his head against the black glass and entertained the rueful thoughts of a separated man. Slowly he came to realize that his mouth was very dry and his thoughts were not only repeating themselves but had taken on an intense, brightly colored form in his head. They were squeezed one on top of another, like strata of shale, and were vividly polychrome, like campaign ribbons. When he swung down from the train onto the platform of the city station, one side of him had grown much larger than the other, so he had to lean sharply or fall down. His body did not so much support as accompany him, in several laggard sections. Walking in what felt like a procession to the subway entrance, through a throng of hooded strangers and across a street of swollen cars, he reasoned what had happened: he had eaten a hash brownie.

One half of his brain kept shouting prudent advice to the other: *Look both ways. Take out a dollar. No, wait, here’s a token. Put it in the slot. Wait for the No. 16, don’t take Symphony. Don’t panic*. Every process seemed to take a very long time, while his ribbonlike thoughts multiplied and shuttled with the speed of a computer. These thoughts kept adding up to nonsense, the other half of his brain noticed, while it called instructions and congratulations throughout his homeward progress. The people in the subway car stared at him as if they could hear this loud interior conversation going on. But he felt safe behind his face, as if behind a steel mask. Wheels beneath him screeched. A code of colored lights flew past the windows.

He was in air again, walking the three blocks from the subway to his apartment. Something in his throat burned. He felt nauseated, and kept selecting hedges and trash cans to vomit in, if it came to that, which it did not, quite. It seemed the confirmation of a gigantically abstruse theorem that his key fit in the lock of his door and that beyond the door lay a room full of dazzlingly familiar furniture. He picked up the telephone, which had the sheen and two-dimensional largeness of an image on a billboard, and called Priscilla.

“Hi, love.”

Her voice rose in pitch. “What’s happened to you, Harold?”

“Do I sound different?”

“Very.” Her voice was sharp as porcupine quills, black with white tips. “What did they do to you?” *They*—his children, his ex-wife.

“They fed me a hash brownie. Jimmy said I wouldn’t feel anything, but on the train in, my thoughts got very little and intense, and on the way from the station I had to keep coaching myself on how to get from there to here.” The protective, trustworthy half of his brain congratulated him on how cogent he sounded.

But something was displeasing to Priscilla. She cried, “Oh, that’s disgusting! I don’t think it’s funny, I don’t think *any* of you are funny.”

“Any of who?”

“You know who.”

“I don’t.” Though he did. He looked at his palms; they were mottled. “Sweetie, I feel like throwing up. Help me.”

“I can’t,” Priscilla said, and hung up. The click sounded like a slap, the same echoing slap that had once exploded next to his ear. Except that his father had become his son, and his mother was his girl friend. This much remained true: it had not been his fault, and in surviving he was somehow blamed.

The palms of his hands, less mottled, looked pale and wrinkled, like uncomfortable pillows. In his shirt pocket Harold found tucked the dollar bill rejected at the subway turnstile, extremely long ago. While waiting for Priscilla to relent and call back, he turned to its back side, examined the mystical eye above the truncated pyramid, and read, over and over, the slogan printed above the ONE.