# Still of Some Use

# John Updike

WHEN FOSTER helped his ex-wife clean out the attic of the house where they had once lived and which she was now selling, they came across dozens of forgotten, broken games. Parcheesi, Monopoly, Lotto; games aping the strategies of the stock market, of crime detection, of real-estate speculation, of international diplomacy and war; games with spinners, dice, lettered tiles, cardboard spacemen, and plastic battleships; games bought in five-and-tens and department stores feverish and musical with Christmas expectations; games enjoyed on the afternoon of a birthday and for a few afternoons thereafter and then allowed, shy of one or two pieces, to drift into closets and toward the attic. Yet, discovered in their bright flat boxes between trunks of outgrown clothes and defunct appliances, the games presented a forceful semblance of value: the springs of their miniature launchers still reacted, the logic of their instructions would still generate suspense, given a chance. “What shall we do with all these games?” Foster shouted, in a kind of agony, to his scattered family as they moved up and down the attic stairs.

“Trash ’em,” his younger son, a strapping nineteen, urged.

“Would the Goodwill want them?” asked his ex-wife, still wife enough to think that all of his questions deserved answers. “You used to be able to give things like that to orphanages. But they don’t call them orphanages anymore, do they?”

“They call them normal American homes,” Foster said.

His older son, now twenty-two, with a cinnamon-colored beard, offered, “They wouldn’t work anyhow; they all have something missing. That’s how they got to the attic.”

“Well, why didn’t we throw them away at the time?” Foster asked, and had to answer himself. Cowardice, the answer was. Inertia. Clinging to the past.

His sons, with a shadow of old obedience, came and looked over his shoulder at the sad wealth of abandoned playthings, silently groping with him for the particular happy day connected to this and that pattern of colored squares and arrows. Their lives had touched these tokens and counters once; excitement had flowed along the paths of these stylized landscapes. But the day was gone, and scarcely a memory remained.

“Toss ’em,” the younger decreed, in his manly voice. For these days of cleaning out, the boy had borrowed a pickup truck from a friend and parked it on the lawn beneath the attic window, so the smaller items of discard could be tossed directly into it. The bigger items were lugged down the stairs and through the front hall; already the truck was loaded with old mattresses, broken clock-radios, obsolete skis and boots. It was a game of sorts to hit the truck bed with objects dropped from the height of the house. Foster flipped game after game at the target two stories below. When the boxes hit, they exploded, throwing a spray of dice, tokens, counters, and cards into the air and across the lawn. A box called Mousetrap, its lid showing laughing children gathered around a Rube Goldberg device, drifted sideways, struck one side wall of the truck, and spilled its plastic components into a flower bed. A set of something called Drag Race! floated gently as a snowflake before coming to rest, much diminished, on a stained mattress. Foster saw in the depth of downward space the cause of his melancholy: he had not played enough with these games. Now no one wanted to play.

Had he and his wife avoided divorce, of course, these boxes would have continued to gather dust in an undisturbed attic, their sorrow unexposed. The toys of his own childhood still rested in his mother’s attic. At his last visit, he had crept up there and wound the spring of a tin Donald Duck; it had responded with an angry clack of its bill and a few stiff strokes on its drum. A tilted board with concentric grooves for marbles still waited in a bushel basket with his alphabet blocks and lead airplanes—waited for his childhood to return.

His ex-wife paused where he squatted at the attic window and asked him, “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. These games weren’t used much.”

“I know. It happens fast. You better stop now; it’s making you too sad.”

Behind him, his family had cleaned out the attic; the slant-ceilinged rooms stood empty, with drooping insulation. “How can you bear it?” he asked, of the emptiness.

“Oh, it’s fun,” she said, “once you get into it. Off with the old, on with the new. The new people seem nice. They have *little* children.”

He looked at her and wondered whether she was being brave or truly hardhearted. The attic trembled slightly. “That’s Ted,” she said.

She had acquired a boy friend, a big athletic accountant fleeing from domestic embarrassments in a neighboring town. When Ted slammed the kitchen door two stories below, the glass shade of a kerosene lamp that, though long unused, Foster hadn’t had the heart to throw out of the window vibrated in its copper clips, emitting a thin note like a trapped wasp’s song. Time for Foster to go. His dusty knees creaked when he stood. His ex-wife’s eager steps raced ahead of him down through the emptied house. He followed, carrying the lamp, and set it finally on the bare top of a bookcase he had once built, on the first-floor landing. He remembered screwing the top board, a prize piece of knot-free pine, into place from underneath, so not a nailhead marred its smoothness.

After all the vacant rooms and halls, the kitchen seemed indecently full of heat and life. “Dad, want a beer?” the bearded son asked. “Ted brought some.” The back of the boy’s hand, holding forth the dewy can, blazed with fine ginger hairs. His girl friend, wearing gypsy earrings and a NO NUKES sweatshirt, leaned against the disconnected stove, her hair in a bandanna and a black smirch becomingly placed on one temple. From the kind way she smiled at Foster, he felt this party was making room for him.

“No, I better go.”

Ted shook Foster’s hand, as he always did. He had thin pink skin and silver hair whose fluffy waves seemed mechanically induced. Foster could look him in the eye no longer than he could gaze at the sun. He wondered how such a radiant brute had got into such a tame line of work. Ted had not helped with the attic today because he had been off in his old town, visiting his teen-aged twins. “I hear you did a splendid job today,” he announced.

“They did,” Foster said. “I wasn’t much use. I just sat there stunned. All these things I had forgotten buying.”

“Some were presents,” his son reminded him. He passed the can his father had snubbed to his mother, who took it and tore up the tab with that defiant-sounding *pssff*. She had never liked beer, yet tipped the can to her mouth.

“Give me one sip,” Foster begged, and took the can from her and drank a long swallow. When he opened his eyes, Ted’s big hand was cupped under Mrs. Foster’s chin while his thumb rubbed away a smudge of dirt along her jaw which Foster had not noticed. This protective gesture made her face look small, pouty, and frail. Ted, Foster noticed now, was dressed with a certain comical perfection in a banker’s Saturday outfit—softened blue jeans, crisp tennis sneakers, lumberjack shirt with cuffs folded back. The youthful outfit accented his age, his hypertensive flush. Foster saw them suddenly as a touching, aging couple, and this perception seemed permission to go.

He handed back the can.

“Thanks for your help,” his former wife said.

“Yes, we do thank you,” Ted said.

“Talk to Tommy,” she unexpectedly added, in a lowered voice. She was still sending out trip wires to slow Foster’s departures. “This is harder on him than he shows.”

Ted looked at his watch, a fat, black-faced thing he could swim under water with. “I said to him coming in, ‘Don’t dawdle till the dump closes.’ ”

“He loafed all day,” his brother complained, “mooning over old stuff, and now he’s going to screw up getting to the dump.”

“He’s very sensi-tive,” the visiting gypsy said, with a strange chiming brightness, as if repeating something she had heard.

Outside, the boy was picking up litter that had fallen wide of the truck. Foster helped him. In the grass there were dozens of tokens and dice. Some were engraved with curious little faces—Olive Oyl, Snuffy Smith, Dagwood—and others with hieroglyphs—numbers, diamonds, spades, hexagons—whose code was lost. He held out a handful for Tommy to see. “Can you remember what these were for?”

“Comic-Strip Lotto,” the boy said without hesitation. “And a game called Gambling Fools there was a kind of slot machine for.” The light of old payoffs flickered in his eyes as he gazed down at the rubble in his father’s hand. Though Foster was taller, the boy was broader in the shoulders, and growing. “Want to ride with me to the dump?” Tommy asked.

“I would, but I better go.” He, too, had a new life to lead. By being on this forsaken property at all, Foster was in a sense on the wrong square, if not *en prise*. He remembered how once he had begun to teach this boy chess, but in the sadness of watching him lose—the little furry bowed head frowning above his trapped king—the lessons had stopped.

Foster tossed the tokens into the truck; they rattled to rest on the metal. “This depresses you?” he asked his son.

“Naa.” The boy amended, “Kind of.”

“You’ll feel great,” Foster promised him, “coming back with a clean truck. I used to love it at the dump, all that old happiness heaped up, and the seagulls.”

“It’s changed since you left. They have all these new rules. The lady there yelled at me last time, for putting stuff in the wrong place.”

“She did?”

“Yeah. It was scary.” Seeing his father waver, he added, “It’ll only take twenty minutes.” Though broad of build, Tommy had beardless cheeks and, between thickening eyebrows, a trace of that rounded, faintly baffled blankness babies have, that wrinkles before they cry.

“O.K.,” Foster said. “You win. I’ll come along. I’ll protect you.”