# Unstuck

# John Updike

IN HIS DREAM, Mark was mixing and mixing on an oval palette a muddy shade of gray he could not get quite right, and this shade of gray was both, in that absurd but deadpan way of dreams, his marriage and the doctrinal position of the local Congregational church, which was resisting the nationwide merger with the Evangelical and Reformed denominations. He was glad to wake up, though his wife’s body, asleep, silently rebuked his. They had made love last night and again she had failed to have her climax.

As the webs of gray paint lifted and the oppressive need to get *the exact precise shade* dawned upon him as unreal, a color from childhood infiltrated his eyes. The air of his bedroom was tinted blue. The ceiling looked waxy. The very sheen on the wallpaper declared: snow. He remembered that it had begun to spit late yesterday afternoon and was streaming in glittering parallels through the streetlamp halo when, an hour earlier than usual, they went to bed.

A car passed, its chains chunking. Farther away, a stuck tire whined. The bedside clock, whose glassy face gleamed as if polished by the excitement in the air, said six-fifty-five. The windowpanes were decorated with those concave little dunes that Mark had often counterfeited in cotton. By profession he was a window decorator, a display man, for a department store in a city fifteen miles away. He eased from the bed and saw that the storm was over: a few final dry flakes, shaken loose by an afterthought in the top twigs of the elm, drifted zigzag down to add their particles to the white weight that had transformed the town—bewigged roofs, bearded clapboards, Christmas-card evergreens, a Stop sign like a frosted lollipop—into one huge display.

The steeple of the Congregational church, painted white, looked spotlit against the heavy grayness that was fading northward into New Hampshire, having done its work here. Over a foot, he guessed. On the street below their windows the plows had been busy; perhaps it had been their all-night struggle that had made his dreams so grating. Scraped streaks of asphalt showed through, and elsewhere the crust had been rutted and beaten into a gloss by the early traffic. So the roads were all right; he could get to work if he could get the car out of the driveway.

Now, at seven, the town fire horn blew the five spaced blasts that signalled the cancellation of school for the day—a noise that blanketed the air for miles around. Mark’s wife opened her eyes in alarm, and then relaxed. They had not been married long and had no children. “What fun,” she said. “A real storm. I’ll make waffles.”

“Don’t be too ambitious,” he said, sounding more sour than he had meant to.

“I want to,” she insisted. “Anyway, the bacon’s been in the fridge for weeks and we ought to use it up.”

She wanted to make a holiday of it. And she wanted, he thought, to bury the aftertaste of last night. He showered and dressed and went out to rescue his car, which was new. Last evening, after watching the forecast on television, he had prudently reparked it closer to the road, its nose pointed outward. No garage had come with this big old house they had recently bought. Their driveway curved in from Hillcrest Road at the back of the yard. The plows had heaped a ridge of already dirty, lumpy snow between his bumper and the cleared street. The ridge came up to his hips, but he imagined that, with the momentum his rear tires could gather on the bare patch beneath the car body, he could push through. Snow is, after all, next to nothing; Mark pictured those airy six-sided crystals so commonly employed as a decorative motif in his trade.

But, getting in behind the steering wheel, he found himself in a tomb. All the windows were sealed by snow. The motor turned over readily and this was a relief. As the motor idled, he staggered around the automobile, clearing the windows with the combination brush and scraper the car dealer had given him. When he cleared the windshield, the wipers shocked him by springing to life and happily flapping. He had left them turned on last night. He got back in behind the wheel and turned them off. Through the cleared windshield, the sky above his neighbor’s rooftop was enamelled a solid blue. The chimney smoked a paler blue, and a host of small brown birds scuffled and settled for warmth in the dark bare patch in its lee. His neighbor herself, a woman wearing a checkered apron, came out of the front door and began banging a broom around on her porch. She saw Mark through the windshield and waved; he grudgingly waved back. She was middle-aged, lacked a husband, wore her lipstick too thick, and seemed a bit too willing to be friendly to this young couple new in the neighborhood.

Mark put the car into first gear. Snow had blown in beneath the sides of the automobile, so the momentum he had hoped to achieve was sluggish in coming. Though his front tires broke through the ridge, the underside dragged and the back tires slithered to a stop in the shallow gutter that ran down the side of Hillcrest Road. He tried reverse. The rear of the car lifted a fraction and then sagged sideways, the wheels spinning in a void. He returned to first gear, and touched the accelerator lightly, and gained for his tact only a little more of that sickening sideways slipping. He tried reverse again and this time there was no motion at all; it was as if he were trying to turn a doorknob with soapy hands. An outraged sense of injustice, of being asked to do too much, swept over him. “Fuck,” he said. He had messed up again. He tried to push open the door, discovered that snow blocked it, shoved savagely, and opened a gap he could worm through backwards. Stepping out, he took an icy shock of snow into his loose galosh.

His neighbor across the street called, “Good morning!” The sound, it seemed, made a strip of snow fall from a telephone wire.

“Isn’t it lovely?” were her next words.

“Sure is,” was his answer. His voice sounded high, with a croak in it.

Her painted lips moved, but the words “If you’re young” came to him faint and late, as if, because of some warping aftereffect of the storm, sound crossed the street from her side against the grain.

Mark slogged down through his back yard, treading in his own footsteps to minimize his desecration of the virgin snow. The bushes were bowed and splayed like bridesmaids overwhelmed by flowers. Chickadee feet had crosshatched the snow under the feeder. The kitchen air struck his face with its warmth and the smells of simmering bacon and burning waffle mix. He told his wife, “I got the damn thing stuck. Get out of your nightie and come help.”

She looked querulous and sallow in her drooping bathrobe. “Can’t we eat breakfast first? You’re going to be late anyway. Shouldn’t you be calling the store? Maybe it won’t be open today.”

“It’ll be open, and anyway even if it isn’t I should be there. Easter won’t wait.” The precise shade of gray he had been mixing in his dream perhaps belonged to some beaverboard cutouts of flowering trees he was preparing for windows of the new spring fashions.

“The *schools* are closed,” she pointed out.

“Well, let’s eat,” he conceded, but ate in his parka, to hurry her. As he swallowed the orange juice, the snow in his galosh slipped deeper down his ankle. Mark said, “If we’d bought that ranch house you were too damn sophisticated for, we’d have a garage and this wouldn’t happen. It takes years off the life of a car, to leave it parked in the open.”

“It’s smoking! Turn the little thing! On the left, the left!” She told him, “I don’t know *why* I bother to try to make you waffles; that iron your mother gave us has never worked. Never, never.”

“Well, it should. It’s not cheap.”

“It sticks. It’s awful. I hate it.”

“It was the best one she could find. It’s supposed to be self-greasing, or some damn thing, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand it. I never have. I was trying to make them to be nice to *you*.”

“Don’t get so upset. The waffles are terrific, actually.” But he ate them without tasting them, he was so anxious to return to the car and erase his error. If a plow were to come along, his car would be jutting into its path, evidence of ineptitude. Young husbands, young car-owners. He wondered if the woman across the street had been laughing at him, getting it stuck. Just that little ridge to push through. He had been so sure he could do it. “I don’t suppose,” he said, “this will cancel the damn church thing tonight.”

“Let’s not go,” she said, scraping the last batch into the garbage, poking the crusts from the waffle grid with a fork. “Why do we have to go?”

“Because,” Mark stated firmly. “These Reformeds, you know, are high-powered stuff. They’re very strict about things like the divinity of Christ.”

“Well, who isn’t? I mean, you either believe it or you don’t, I would think.”

He winced, feeling himself to blame. If he had given her a climax, she wouldn’t be so irreligious. “This is a wonderful breakfast,” he said. “How do you make the bacon so crisp?”

“You put it on a paper bag for a minute,” she said. “Did you *really* get the car stuck? Maybe you should call the man at the garage.”

“It just needs a little push,” he promised. “Come on, bundle up. It’ll be fun. Old Mrs. Whatsername across the street is out there with the birds, sweeping her porch. It’s beautiful.”

“I *know* it is,” she said. “I used to *love* snowstorms.”

“But not now, huh?” He stood and asked her, “Where’s the fucking shovel?”

She went upstairs, the belt of her sad bathrobe trailing, and he found the snow shovel in the basement. The furnace, whirring and stinking to itself, reminded him pleasantly that snow on the roof reduced the fuel bill. The old house needed insulation. Everything needed something. On his way out through the kitchen he noticed a steaming cup of coffee she had poured for him, like one of those little caches one explorer leaves behind for another. To appease her, he took two scalding swallows before heading out into the wilderness of his brilliant back yard.

By the time Mark’s wife joined him, looking childish and fat and merry in her hood and mittens and ski leggings and fur-topped boots, he had shovelled away as much of the snow underneath and around the car as he could reach. The woman across the street had gone back into her house, the birds on her roof had flown away, and a yellow town truck had come down Hillcrest Road scattering sand. He had leaned on the shovel and waved at the men on the back as if they were all comrades battling together in a cheerful war.

She asked, “Do you want me to steer?”

“No, you push. It’ll just take a tiny push now. I’ll drive, because I know how to rock it.” He stationed her at the rear right corner of the car, where there happened to be a drift that came up over her knees. He felt her make the silent effort of not complaining. “The thing is,” he told her, “to keep it from sloughing sideways.”

“Sluing,” she said.

“Whatever it is,” he said, “keep it from doing that.”

But slue was just what it did; though he rammed the gearshift back and forth between first and reverse, the effect of all that rocking was—he could feel it—to work the right rear tire deeper into the little slippery socket on the downhill side. He assumed she was pushing, but he couldn’t see her in the mirror and he couldn’t feel her.

His stomach ached, with frustration and maple syrup. He got out of the car. His wife’s face was pink, exhilarated. Her hood was back and her hair had come undone. “You’re closer than you think,” she said. “Where’s the shovel?” She dabbled with it around the stuck tire, doing no good that he could see.

“It’s that damn little gutter,” he said, impotently itching to grab the shovel from her. “In the summer you’re not even conscious of its being there.”

She thrust the shovel into a mound so it stood upright and told him, “Sweetheart, now you push. You’re stronger than I am.”

Grudgingly, he felt flattered. “All right. We’ll try it. Now, with the accelerator—don’t gun it. You just dig yourself deeper with the spinning tires.”

“That’s what *you* were doing.”

“That’s because you weren’t pushing hard enough. And steer for the middle of the street, and rock it back and forth gently, back and forth; and don’t panic.”

As she listened to these instructions, a dimple beside the corner of her mouth kept appearing and disappearing. She got into the driver’s seat. A little shower of snow, loosened by the climbing sun, fell rustling through a nearby tree, and the woman across the street came onto her porch without the broom, plainly intending to watch. Her lipstick at this distance was like one of those identifying spots of color on birds.

Mark squatted down and pressed his shoulder against the trunk and gripped the bumper with his hands. A scratch in the paint glinted beneath his eyes. How had that happened? He still thought of their car as brand-new. Snow again insinuated its chill bite into his galosh. Nervous puffs of dirty smoke rippled out of the exhaust pipe and bounced against his legs. He was aware of the woman on the porch, watching. He felt all the windows of the neighborhood watching.

The woman in the driver’s seat eased out the clutch. The tires revolved, and the slippery ton of the automobile’s rear end threatened to slide farther sideways; but he fought it, and she fed more gas, and they seemed to gain an inch forward. Doing what she had told him, she rocked the car back, and at the peak of its backward swing gunned it forward again, and he felt their forward margin expand. *Good girl*. He heaved; they paused; the car rocked back and then forward again and he heaved so hard the flat muscles straddling his groin ached. Mark seemed to feel, somewhere within the inertial masses they were striving to manage, his personal strength register a delicate response, a flicker in the depths. The car relaxed backwards, and in this remission he straightened and saw through the rear window the back of the driver’s head, her hood down, her hair loosened. The wheels spun again, the car dipped forward through the trough it had worn, and its weight seemed to hang, sustained by his strength, on the edge of release. “Once more,” he shouted, trembling through the length of his legs. The car sagged back through an arc that had noticeably distended, and in chasing its forward swing with his pushing he had to take steps, one, two … *three!* The rear tires, frantically excited and in their spinning spitting snow across his lower half, slithered across that invisible edge he had sensed. The ridge was broken through, and if he continued to push, it was with gratuitous exertion, adding himself through sheer affection to an irresistible momentum. They were free.

Feeling this also, she whipped the steering wheel to head herself downhill and braked to a stop some yards away. The car, stuttering smoke from its exhaust pipe, perched safe in the center of the sand-striped width of Hillcrest Road. It was a 1960 Plymouth SonoRamic Commando V-8, with fins. Its driver, silhouetted with her nose tipped up, looked much too frail to have managed so big a thing.

Mark shouted “Great!” and leaped over the shattered ridge, brandishing the shovel. The woman on the porch called something to him he couldn’t quite catch but took kindly. He walked to his car and opened the door and got in beside his wife. The heater had come on; the interior was warm. He repeated, “You were great.” He was still panting.

She rosily smiled and said, “So were you.”