# Learn a Trade

# John Updike

“MOBILES?” Fegley echoed over the telephone, with a sinking feeling. He was an internationally known junk sculptor whose annual income ran well into six figures, but in his mind he was still an unpopular and ill-coördinated adolescent walking out to a rural mailbox in Missouri to place in it a brown envelope containing cartoons and addressed to *Collier’s*, or else to discover there a brown envelope returned from the same magazine with a rejection slip. Partch, Hoff, Rea—he imitated them all, and yet everything came back. Once, he tried to sell the nearest city’s only newspaper a comic strip and then took the same cartoons to the local department store, as the possible basis for an advertising scheme. His mother went with him into the city that day, since he was too young to drive, and a street photographer snapped a picture of them walking together, she clutching her purse, he holding his portfolio under a skinny arm, both of them looking distracted and tired. His mother had sponsored his “creativity,” indulged it. Almost his first memory of her was of a young woman sitting on the threadbare carpet with him, crayoning solid a space at the top of a page of the coloring book on the floor before him; it seemed marvellous to the child that she, sitting opposite him, could color upside down, as well as with such even, gentle strokes, which never strayed outside the printed outlines. Fegley’s father, who supplemented the income from the farm by working as a non-union carpenter, wrung his hands to think of his son’s wasting his life on hopeless ambitions. “Learn a trade,” he begged the boy. “Get a solid trade, and then you can fool around with this artsy-craftsy stuff.” One night in bed, Fegley, shortly before going off to a New York art school, overheard his father confide to his mother downstairs, “They’ll just break his heart.”

Overhearing this, the boy had inwardly scoffed. And eventually, moving from cartooning, by way of imitating the playful sculpture of Picasso and Ipoustéguy, into a world of galleries and spacious duplexes and expectant museum spaces that his father had never dreamed existed, he proved the old man wrong. Yet the older that Fegley himself grew, the more it seemed his father had been essentially right.

In the pattern of his generation he had married young, had four children, and eventually got a divorce. His first wife, met at the art school, had been herself artistic: Sarah painted delicate impressionistic still-lifes and landscapes that were often abandoned before the corners were filled. There was usually something wrong with the perspective, though the colors were remarkably true. He sometimes blamed himself, in their years together, for not encouraging her more; but in truth all “this artsy-craftsy stuff” depressed him, and he hoped that his children would become scientists. He plied the two boys, especially, with telescopes and microscopes, chemistry sets and books of mathematical puzzles; they squinted at Saturn’s rings for an evening and at magnified salt granules for an afternoon, and then the expensive tubes of brass and chrome drifted toward the closets already full of deflated footballs and gadgets whose batteries had given out. Fegley’s two daughters, as they grew into women, with the distances and silences of women, took watercolor brushes and pads on their sunbathing expeditions, and at home solemnly inscribed haiku on pebble board with crow-quill pens. Their mother encouraged all this, having set the example by her own dabbling, which fitfully continued into her middle age; the house was strewn with Sarah’s half-completed canvases. Fegley did his powerful, successful sculpture—most famously, the series of giant burnished insects fabricated from discarded engine blocks and transmission systems—in an old machine shop he rented two miles from the house, down low along the Hudson. He did not encourage his children to visit him there, and even had his subscription to *Artnews* directed to that address. He was like a man who, having miraculously survived a shipwreck, wants to warn all others back at the edge of the sea. As the two boys grew older, he congratulated himself that they seemed more concerned with putting their feet to leather balls and car accelerators than with setting implements to paper. Unlike his youthful self, they were popular and well-coördinated, and expert at sports. The older went off to college determined to make the football varsity, having been a spectacularly shifty tight end for his boarding school, but somewhere under the cloud of his parents’ divorce proceedings he dropped out of athletics and into film studies; he took courses (college courses! for credit!) that analyzed the cutting rhythm in old Laurel and Hardy comedies and the advance of camera mobility in musical comedies of the Forties. Now he was living in a squalid Manhattan loft with several other aspirants to the world of film, lost young souls stoned on media, pounding the sidewalks and virtually (who knows?—maybe actually) selling their bodies for the whisper of a promise of becoming an assistant grip’s assistant in a public-television documentary on the African killer bee. Fegley’s daughters had also faded into the limbo of artistic endeavor; one was in northern California making “pinch pots” out of her lover’s back-yard clay, and the other was editing a journal of genealogy in Cincinnati while working on a highly ambitious feminist novel called *Ever Since Eve*. This left uncontaminated by creativity only the younger son, Warren. Warren was a broad-shouldered brown-eyed nineteen-year-old who had once collected butterflies and rock specimens and who was clever with his hands; he had even given signs of becoming a carpenter, working alongside his grandfather for a few summers, before the old man died. Here at last, Fegley had thought, was my practical, down-to-earth child.

So it was with a sinking feeling that Fegley heard that the boy was making mobiles this summer. “But what about his job?” he asked.

“I don’t think he ever called that number Clara gave him,” Sarah said.

Clara, Fegley’s present wife, was a civil engineer with a firm in White Plains and had given her stepson a lead on a summer job with a road-repair crew.

“What do you mean exactly, mobiles?” Fegley asked.

“They’re lovely,” the distant voice answered. “They really must be seen to be believed. You should come look.” Her voice was fading; one of her annoying habits, which he had not been much aware of as long as they lived together, was that of dropping the telephone mouthpiece to her chin as she talked.

“All right, damn it: I’ll be right over,” Fegley said. “I want to *talk* to Warren. Clara went to a lot of trouble to find a contractor who had filled his minority quota.” He left his new studio, an abandoned gas station in Port Chester, with its friendly mounds of junk and pleasant, unifying stench of the acetylene torch, and swung his Porsche up onto the battered road, into that overtrafficked grid interconnecting Westchester County’s hidden green hives of plenty. He drove the thirty minutes across 287 to his old suburb.

It was strange, to be in his former home. The large Tarry-town house, once so full of children and their music and clutter, was silent now, and its furniture only half familiar. The former Mrs. Fegley had a new husband, a hearty pipe-smoker whose spoor and scent were everywhere. Like Clara, the man led a useful inartistic life and worked all day. Sarah still painted and, what was hurtful, had improved; her recent still-lifes were filled to the corners, and the perspective was tight as a drum. Apologetically she announced, “Warren said he’d be right back. I told him you were coming.”

“Aha. Where did he go, ostensibly?”

“He said downtown to buy some more copper wire. His mobiles take a lot of it.”

“I bet. Do you know what copper wire costs these days?”

“Of course. Who do you think gives him the money?”

“Then why do you let him?”

“I let *you*,” she said, and looked lightly away—the equivalent of allowing the telephone mouthpiece to slip down to her chin. It was true: she had let him do what he could. She had indulged him. For a time she had supported them both, working as a salesgirl in the old Fifth Avenue Bonwit’s.

Sarah had put on weight, without impairing a certain absent-minded grace that flitted into the air from foci in her wrists and ankles. Adjusted to the sight of her and the ambience of the house, Fegley remembered the kindergarten crayon scrawls posted on the refrigerator with magnets, the driftwood sculptures brought home from their summer rentals, the collages of beach glass, the crow-quilled haiku, the linoleum cuts at Christmastime, the cardboard circuses. Once, Fegley had bought the children a set of Cuisenaire rods to inculcate number theory, and the baby daughter, then about four years old, had taken two of the units for number one—tiny wood cubes—and pencilled dots on them to make dice. She had made little cats of the rectangular rods representing number two, dogs of the longer threes, people with faces and bow ties of the still longer fours, and skyscrapers, with pencilled windows and canopied doorways, of the fives. Sarah had gone ecstatic over this show of “creativity.” The child, Fegley saw now, should have been spanked. A delayed fury spoke in him: “You’ve brought these kids up to live in a never-never land. All this stuff, the world doesn’t *need* it. It needs practical nurses. It needs securities analysts. You should *tell* them.”

“I never told *you*,” she said, in that same mild and distant voice. “Why should I say it to *them?*”

“I was different,” he said. “I was ignorant. I was desperate to get out of Missouri. Our children aren’t desperate, they’re just kidding around.”

Sarah shrugged. “Who’s to say? He’s been *so* excited. I’ve never seen him work this hard—down in the cellar all day and into the night, pounding and sawing.”

Fegley’s father’s hands, he remembered, had combined the hardened traces of chisel-nicks and saw-slips with a spotty bubbling of brown warts on the backs. Those hands had done honest work, Fegley used to think, admiring them; and now his own hands, scarred by metal, looked much the same. The image of his broad-shouldered son in the cellar, captive to an illusion, and of a once young and slender woman standing on sore feet behind a counter at Bonwit’s, and of his own young mother sitting opposite him carefully crayoning in the depths of the Depression—these superimposed images afflicted him with a pathos and sense of waste that were paralyzing. His former wife had to prompt, “Why don’t you go down and look at them?”

“I don’t want to see the damn things. I came to see *him*.”

“It might be a while before he comes back, frankly. I think he was scared of what you’d say to him, that’s why he took off.” Warren had inherited his brown eyes from her, with those same elusive golden flecks.

“Poor little Warren,” Fegley said, and descended the steps to his former cellar. Scrap lumber and stray junk from the long ago when he had worked at home had mysteriously disappeared; his old workbench supported an unfamiliar litter of pliers and snippers, coiled wire, cut tin, glue, tape, and mutilated sheets of plastic and cardboard. A new fluorescent tube brightened the work space, but Warren had hung the finished mobiles in the dimness that stretched beneath the cobwebbed pipes and floor stringers to the faint far stone foundation wall. Each mobile embodied a different idea: some suggested the flight of birds, others the scales of a dragon; some were twirled of copper wire into terminations like the heads of fiddlehead ferns, and some held at the ends of invisible black-wire arms cardboard paddle shapes, or crescents or circles, ranged in sequences drifting outward in precarious spacy cascades that gently moved as the creator’s mother’s footsteps, heavy with fatality, descended the stairs.

“See?” Sarah asked.

Each mobile by itself might have looked spindly, but the effect of so many, hanging unsold, unrequested by the world, waiting here in the dark, was of a leafy forest or a firmament of stars twinkling one behind the other in a recession as good as infinite.

“Yeah,” Fegley had to say, half to himself. His former wife came and stood beside him, to get the same perspective. “That’s right,” he said. “Keep breaking my heart.”