# One More Interview

# John Updike

THE ACTOR’S TOUR had taken him to a Midwestern city fifteen miles from the small town where he had grown up, and an interviewer called suggesting that they visit there together. “It would provide, you know,” he said, “an angle.” The newspaper the interviewer worked for was the only one left in the city, and this gave it an aura of absolute power, of final opportunity. The actor was at that awkward age almost too old for romantic leads but not old enough for character parts. Opportunity, his agent had more than once told him, doesn’t knock forever. He could use the publicity.

“I can’t stand interviews,” he said.

The prospective interviewer said nothing, just waited.

“They’re so intrinsically imprecise,” the actor went on. “So sadly prurient.” The presence on the other end of the line stuck to its silence. The female exclamations of another conversation faintly wafted into the braided wires. “O.K.,” the actor said, and they set a time to meet on the hotel parking lot.

The interviewer stood beside a little mustard-colored car; he wore dun bell-bottoms and a denim jacket cut as short as a waiter’s jacket. He was a trim, tight young man with an exceptionally small mouth and wiry black hair that had about it, without being exactly kinky, a glisten of contained energy, a kind of silent acrylic crackle that declared it would never decompose. There would be no mercy, the actor saw. He would have to watch what he said as carefully as if he were in court. Unfortunate words had a way of passing into print from a single absent-minded nod politely granted an impudent question. The actor had a number of former wives, each equipped with vigilant lawyers, and he moved through the dark skies of private life, it sometimes seemed to him, like a comet trailing stiff white envelopes of legal stationery. So: no politeness today, no ridiculous “givingness,” no charming sharing of indiscretions with this person to whom he was not a person, after all, but a name, an object to be exploited, a walking slag heap to be sifted for ore one more time.

“Would you like me to drive, so you can take notes?” the actor asked. He was a big-boned, coarse-skinned man offstage, and he took pleasure in menacing at the outset, with such extravagant coöperation, his wiry little persecutor.

“Why, yes, that might be nice, come to think of it.”

The car was a Japanese model, as cunning and tawdry as a music-box. It had four forward gears and a reverse tucked somewhere in the lower right quadrant, where New Zealand is on a map. The dashboard hummed and spelled out monosyllables of instruction and warning. The actor felt clumsy. “I don’t drive much anymore,” he explained. “I’m just dragged around by these limousines.”

“What about at your summer place in Amagansett?” the interviewer asked, having already produced a notebook.

“My last wife got that, as you probably know. The place, the Porsche, the works.”

“No, I didn’t know.” The man wrote busily.

“Don’t put that in—Christ,” the actor begged, shifting from first gear straight into fourth, with a fearful laboring of the engine.

“It’s on the record, isn’t it, elsewhere?”

“Well, let’s not put it on again. Makes it look as though I have nothing else to talk about.”

“Of course,” the interviewer said. He put the notebook away and gazed out the window.

The actor didn’t like this swift, prim docility, either; it seemed stagy. From the side, the other man’s mouth was a mere irritated nick in his profile; he resented having been ousted from the driver’s seat.

“This wasn’t meant to be so much a personal piece about you and your, uh, affairs,” the interviewer said, “as about the place. You in regard to the place you grew up in.”

“It’s not much of a place, that was its charm,” the actor said, and added, “Don’t put that in, either.”

The miles went by. Inner suburbs gave way to outer, and then there was something like countryside, behind the roadside gas stations and the old stone farmhouses with reflecting balls in their front yards. The interviewer sat silent, in what seemed to be a sulk. The strange impression grew upon the actor that this man had been a high-school athlete, a second-baseman: quick on the pivot and pesky at the plate. Determined to be entertaining, to charm away the sulk, the actor talked about the play he was in, leading actresses he had worked with, his theories of stagecraft, his philosophy of professional ups and downs. The interviewer kept his notebook tucked away. The little automobile had become quite responsive to the actor’s touch, and began to swing along curves he knew by heart, having driven them as a child, first with his father at the wheel and then with himself in control. “Of course,” the actor explained, as they approached the town limits, “all this was trees and fields then. That mall didn’t exist. That mess of ticky-tacky houses over there was just a dairy farm with a little creek that ran through a pasture where my mother’s quainter relatives used to gather watercress. There was a dam and a pond back in there where the tough boys and the pretty girls used to go swimming. I never did. My mother thought I might drown or lose my virginity or have people think I did, which would be even worse.”

“Uh-huh,” the interviewer said, as though he had heard this before.

“Don’t put that in about my mother and virginity,” the actor asked. “She still has cousins in the area, in nursing homes mostly. There used to be a diner here,” he announced abruptly, “that stayed open all night. At two in the morning you could go there, after a date, all light-headed and your face full of lipstick, and eat a hamburger. That was my idea of the sophisticated life, eating a hamburger at two in the morning. A man called Smoky Moser ran it. He never seemed to sleep. We kids loved him. Loved him like a father, you could say. He was the father I yearned for.”

“Is that a fact?”

“I exaggerate a little. Smoky was O.K., though. Died young, of some disease nobody would ever name. Better skip that: he may have a widow.”

Grudgingly the interviewer had got out his notebook and made a few notes. The gravel lot that had surrounded the diner was occupied now by a great cube of brown-tinted glass, the branch of a statewide bank. Yellow arrows painted on the smooth asphalt told automobiles how to proceed to the drivein windows. The actor studied the faces of the people moving in and out of the bank and recognized none of them, though there was something he did recognize—a tone, a pallor and density of flesh in their arms and faces, a way of suddenly looking behind and above them, unsmilingly, fearing the worst out of the sky, the weather of the world. “Up here, there was a feed mill, where …”

Where some of the faster girls had supposedly let it be done to them, that fabled thing, in the weedy area between two asbestos-shingled walls. The actor was surprised, after the more than a decade since he had last visited, by how sexy the town was, how saturated with love and that psychosomatic quickening which love brings. The cotton-wool sky, the heavy dusty trees, the very tone of dull red in the bricks arrived in unison at something like one’s own exact body temperature. Surrounded by farm country, it was a kind of hill town, divided in the middle by an avenue that followed the curve of an abandoned railroad bed. The town’s lower part, south of the avenue, had been built solid in the years just before the Depression in rows of brick semi-detached houses, houses with symmetrical big living-room windows and square-pillared front porches. There was a security here, in these ruddy rows, block after block, each with its little apron of terraced lawn, and two concrete steps leading up to the first terrace, and little pansy beds or barberry hedges along the walk. The rectilinear, repetitive streets were high-crowned, and the actor was made to remember the rhythm imparted to a car, the soft braking and dipping, as the intersections were cautiously traversed. Many an afternoon, many a Sunday, he had cruised these streets in his parents’ old tan Dodge, and then in the navy-blue Chrysler with the iridescent touched-up patch on the fender, looking for the action, for a familiar car parked outside a house he knew, which might signal an afternoon of canasta or an evening of laughing at Liberace or the roller derby on that new toy called television. Any excuse for a party, a party wherever two or three got together.

“This side of town hasn’t changed much at all,” he told the interviewer. “How could it? They didn’t leave any vacant lots.” Each of the thickset duplexes was like a married couple, it occurred to him now, the rumblings and spats on one side of the wall impossible not to hear on the other. “For some reason,” the actor said, “the terrific-looking girls all tended to live over in this section. My family lived in a house all alone on its lot, on the older side of town. There’s a distinct change once you cross the avenue. The houses, a lot of them, are wood, and look—how can I say?—gaunt. Pinched. Scary, even. Don’t put that in.”

He steered the nimble little car through a stoplight that hadn’t been there thirty years ago and drove uphill, out of the cozy low-lying area of red brick rows, into the slanting neighborhood where he had been raised. “That used to be a barber shop,” he said, driving up Liberty Street. “You can still see the striped pole, though Jake’s been dead for years now. Apoplexy, if memory serves. Can you spell it?” Haircuts—the long wait and then the sitting so still as metal gnashed across your scalp—had filled the actor as a child with a gloom and suspense bordering on terror. There had been a big plate-glass window, and as the scissors interminably clicked, the sunshine and the traffic on the other side had seemed an unattainable paradise. Now that big window held Venetian blinds and a sign proclaiming that gold and silver could be bought and sold here. He suddenly remembered the octagonal green-and-cream pattern of the linoleum floor, dotted with hair clippings, where Jake would tap-dance. Not tap-dance, perhaps, but do a spry and comical shuffle-and-slide on that slick floor. Jake had hated Roosevelt—the thought of the man had made him apoplectic—and in the fury of his shrill tirades must have felt the danger of driving customers away, for he would suddenly relent, and change the poisoned subject, and go into his little comical steps, sometimes with the broom as partner. “And where you see that marquee with ‘Bingo’ on it was the old movie house, where I learned to dream,” the actor said. “To dream and to pose, you could put it.” Actually, the sign said INGO, and the look of disuse in its new role as a gambling hall had overtaken the theatre. The old glass cases where the movie posters—Alan Ladd, Lana Turner, Lassie—had been different every week were empty of any advertisement and had been defaced with illegible spray-painted swirls.

“Which was your house?” the interviewer asked.

“That one.”

“Which one?”

“You missed it. It looks just like the ones around it.”

“I thought you said it stood so alone on its lot.”

“They were small lots.” Why was he being perverse, the actor wondered—denying this infielder the small intrusion of gazing upon his averagely shabby and plain birthplace? Was it that the house itself, in his own quick glimpse of it, seemed to beg that he not give it away? It was wearing a new color of paint—a bright lime green—like a desperate disguise. Or was it that he himself was ashamed, of it, because it in fact had *not* been just like the ones around it? The house had been and still was slightly smaller than its flanking neighbors, those better-kept and higher-gabled houses owned in his boyhood by the Behns and the Murchisons, who looked down on them, his mother had felt, because his father worked with his hands, because his father was unemployed, because his father came home drunk and could be heard cursing out on the lawn.… There were many reasons why the Behns and the Murchisons might look down on them.

The actor’s furtive glimpse had not been so quick, however, that he did not spy in the shrubbery around the front porch, with its jigsawed banister uprights, the invisible ghosts that had kept him company when he hid there, there where the earth had been too packed and sheltered to give weeds a purchase, like a hard floor. The spaces between the bushes had been like a set of little rooms only he lived in, and where he entertained voices. Who had these presences been that had spoken back to the voice inside his head? They were still there, crowded around the porch, calling out to him. There were even a few at the side of the house, where his mother had tried to grow peonies against the brick foundation, and it had proved too shady. Or had she planted the roots too deep? Mrs. Behn told her she had, and they didn’t speak for a year. Imagine, his mother had said, her spying down on me from those parlor windows and not saying a word until it was too late and the peonies were dug in. The cement walk along here, in the shadows, used to accumulate anthills in the cracks, as well as neighborhood bitterness. Out back, there had been a sandbox, and its little ridges had been dunes in the Sahara, and the green lead tanks had been chasing Rommel. The voices the actor had heard while playing in the sandbox had been different; they had been news voices, broadcast from overseas.

“You said you learned to dream and to pose in the movie house,” the interviewer prompted.

They were driving down another block, and his old home was sealed safe behind them. “And in the high school,” the actor said. “I’ll take you by it. They built it up on top of the hill; the only thing higher in town is the cemetery. Here’s a confession for you. You like confessions, don’t you?”

That silence again.

“I had terrible acne as a kid, from about fourteen on. Just like my father. He was all pockmarked. Well, when I put on makeup for some assembly play in about ninth grade, my own skin disappeared! For as long as I was onstage, I was like everybody else: I was human. So I said to myself, ‘Hey. The actor’s life for me.’ ”

“Many adolescent boys have acne, don’t they?” There seemed a reprimand in this, a call back to relativity.

“I don’t know. Did you?”

“Not so bad, actually.”

“Well, then. I bet you were quite a smooth jock in your time.”

“Well, I was …”

“Don’t be modest. You played second base, didn’t you?”

“Center field, usually.”

“Same idea. Anyway, I didn’t care what other boys had. They were them and I was me. Leave that grammar just the way I said it.”

“Yes. I don’t know that I can use everything you say; you’ve already been quite generous with your time.”

“Also, I loved having a role; it wasn’t just the makeup. The whole role was like a mask, a spiritual mask I was safe behind. If people laughed, it wasn’t at me, exactly. I loved to hear them laugh. Let’s hear you laugh.”

Silence.

“Come on. For me.”

It was a dry, embarrassed noise.

“I love it,” the actor complimented him. “There you see the high school. The old style, Roman pillars and all. They say when you come back to a place things look smaller, but it looks bigger than ever to me. It looks huge. I hear they don’t have students to fill it now.” He swung the corner, racily. “This little bug really has some zip, doesn’t it? There used to be a variety store here, with the steps at an angle and the little overhang, and paper pumpkins in the window at the appropriate time of year, and then Christmas cards and Easter eggs.… It was a kind of 3-D calendar you could walk into and take a stool. There was a counter we could sit up at and smoke. And look at ourselves smoking in the mirror. I bet you never smoked, did you?”

“No. As you guessed, I was big into sports.”

“God, I used to smoke. Anything to keep a mask in front of my face. It’s gone now. The store.”

The new owners had painted everything white, even the display windows, so no one could look in. Somebody must be living behind those blank windows. The people who had descended upon the town to live in it since the actor had left were aliens from space; he could not imagine their lives. “Now we’re getting into a part of town that was new then—rich houses, we thought they were, though they don’t look so rich now. The section was called Oak Slope. To live in Oak Slope was about the ritziest thing I could imagine, to live in Oak Slope and have huge closets of clothes, with a different corduroy shirt for every day of the week. Corduroy shirts—that dates me. And we used to wear reindeer sweaters; I don’t suppose you know what a reindeer sweater was, do you?”

“I can imagine.”

“I’m not sure you can. The sharp guys, there was a word then, ‘snazzy,’ s-n-a-z-z-y, the snazzy guys, whose fathers sold real estate or were foremen at the mill, owned a lot of them, beautifully knitted, with different things, it wasn’t just reindeer—snowflakes, butterflies.…”

“They’re still around.”

“It’s not the same. I used to wear the one I had inside out some days, as if it was another sweater. It didn’t fool anybody but made me feel slightly, you could say, snazzy. I’ll be honest about it: I was pathetic. More than that, I was obnoxious. With acne yet. Just driving around Oak Slope makes me *feel* obnoxious. How am I acting?” He got no answer. “Now, down here,” the actor announced, “this curving street, when I was a lad—another funny old-fashioned word, l-a-d—past the last new house built, there used to be a kind of dirt road that didn’t go anywhere much and was a great place to park, if you had a girl.”

At the age of seventeen, he had acquired a girl, Ermajean Willis. “For heaven’s sake,” the actor exclaimed, without acting, his exclamation honest. “It’s still here. I would have thought it’d been built up ages ago.”

The necking place. The spatial feeling of the spot—with a tall bank of earth on one side, freshly bulldozed then and still rather raw and scraggly now, and a lower rise on the other side, deep green from the time when this had been a hillside hayfield—was unaltered, uncorrupted, sexy. In his excitement the actor braked; the interviewer glanced over, worried. “Amazing,” said the actor, spacing his syllables, back in performance. “I wonder if it’s still used.”

“I see a few beer bottles,” said the interviewer uneasily.

“You don’t understand what a lovely surprise this is. For a space like this to last, in modern America. The cops used to check it out once in a while and shine a flashlight in the windows.” The little unpaved road that generations of furtive, love-craving cars had worn into the earth continued for a few yards between the two sheltering grassy shoulders and then dipped down to rejoin a side street called Button. Button led into Maple, Maple crossed the avenue, and two more blocks took you into Sycamore; Ermajean used to live at the corner of Sycamore and Pierce. A kind of hazy warmth, as when he would show up after midnight at Smoky’s diner, had been laid across the actor’s face. Without his realizing it, the little Japanese car had under his hands driven itself along the remembered route, into that inviting red realm of the two-family brick houses in rows. The car had come to the corner of Pierce and Sycamore, to the big house whose retaining walls were ornamented with mossy concrete balls and whose side entrance was a set of steps with an iron railing he had often grasped; he softly braked. She would come down those very steps for a date, all starchy and perfumed and hopeful, though what had he had to offer her but a second-run movie and an ice-cream soda afterwards? As she hurried across the street to the old Chrysler with the patched fender, her pastel dress would be flattened against her thighs by her hurrying, by the soft wind she made in her haste to be with him.

“My girl friend used to live here,” he confessed to his interviewer.

“You had only one?”

“Well, yes. How many do you recommend? I thought I was lucky to have even one. She was a grade behind me at school, and after I graduated I lost track of her. Married, I suppose, somewhere.” The actor was incredulous that the interviewer could be blind to the glory around them, the railings and retaining walls and little laplike lawns of these solid, unchanging homes, rows that at any moment might release Ermajean, racing lightly toward them with her hair in barrettes and her round young legs tipped by the kind of open-toed white heels women in Hollywood comedies wore—Jean Arthur, Rosalind Russell. The actor felt swamped by love; he was physically sickened, to think that such a scene had once been real, and that a self of his had been there to play a part.

His foot eased the clutch back in, and the car moved off reluctantly. “Let me show you some more of the town,” he offered. “There’s a quarry where we used to ice-skate. And a playground. A block from here, where they put the new annex on the town hall, there used to be the strangest little structure, like something out of Disneyland, a sort of stone tower where you paid your water bills.”

Ermajean loved butter-pecan ice cream, he remembered, in a vanilla soda, and always debated with him whether she should have onion on her hamburger. If he would, she would. And her skin—all of his life since, he had been dealing with women who were doctoring their skins—vitamin-E cream, pancake makeup, moisturizers. Ermajean’s skin had been utterly neutral in shade, neutral and natural, tinted by nothing, pure trusting female skin beneath her pastel clothes. The actor’s face felt hot; he wanted to cruise forever through this half of town, the car dipping in a kind of obeisance at every intersection.

The interviewer cleared his throat and said, “I think maybe I’ve seen enough. This is only for a sidebar, you know.”

“Wait. How about coming with me to my old luncheonette and having a bite to eat? How about some butter-pecan ice cream?”

The other man laughed, stiffly, as when commanded to laugh before. “And then there’s a time problem,” he said. “If I don’t get this in tonight, your show won’t still be around.”

“That’s O.K. The luncheonette is a flower shop now anyway. Please, don’t put my old girl friend’s name in the article.”

“You never mentioned it.”

“Ermajean Willis. E-r-m-a-j-e-a-n. Isn’t that a wonderful funky name?”

“Maybe it’d be easier if I drove now.”

“No. Keep your pencil out. You son of a bitch, I’m going to tell you the names of every family that used to live in this entire block.”