# Slippage

# John Updike

A NOT QUITE SLIGHT EARTHQUAKE—5.4 on the Richter scale—afflicted Morison’s area early one morning: at 6:07, it said later over the news. He awoke abruptly, nauseated without knowing why. Then the last shudder made the bedside lamp give out a delicate buzzing noise, a kind of tingle, and in the little heave, as if the bed were a boat sluing in a wave trough, he looked about the room wide-eyed, to see what damage there was. There appeared to be none; the crisp low plaster ceiling was intact to its corners, no broken glass showed on the windowsills, the water glass and alarm clock and folded spectacles had not abandoned their stations beneath his lamp. His wife at his side had not stirred. Only the top of her head showed—long blond wisps, mussed. She always slept deep under the covers, her face off the pillow, as if in the night she had slipped down toward the foot of the bed. Her body under the covers was flattened frighteningly, like something dead on the road. He pressed his own body more securely against the mattress and waited, eyes open, for the room’s motion to renew itself; he waited for the end of the world. But the little earthquake had subsided, and within an hour had become an amusing item on the televised news, the kind that lets the anchormen, after tense recitation of international massacres and negotiations, relax their faces and segue kiddingly into the weatherman.

No significant damage had been reported. The center of the disturbance lay in the thinly populated mountains eighty miles to the north. Area residents had flooded the station with calls.

“Interesting,” Morison said to his wife over their second cup of coffee, “that people call television stations now.”

“Instead of what?” She was much younger than he, and seemed cranky as a child in the mornings, her face still imprinted with the creases of the wrinkled bedsheet. “What *should* they call?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Police stations. City Hall. They seem to think authority now is vested in the television station.”

“There’s no point in calling *anybody* about an earthquake anyway,” she said irritably.

“I agree,” Morison quickly said, feeling the conversation slipping toward a quarrel.

“Did you really wake up seasick, or are you just imagining things again?”

His memory extended so much further back in time than hers that she liked to dismiss its superior content as imagination. She was getting them both ready, he sometimes felt, for his senility, though he was barely sixty. “I certainly did. The whole room shook. The bed absolutely jumped. *You*,” he added in an accusatory tone, “slept right through, like a”—he didn’t want to say “baby”—“like a log.”

“I was *tired*,” she whined, reaching for another cigarette. She knew the sight of her smoking pained him, and hurried lighting the match. “All these end-of-the-year parties with drunken professors. Keuschnig last night got all sentimental with me about the Anglo-Saxons. Their valor, the comitatus, I forget all what. His hand kept creeping to my knee, and I could have sworn at one point there were tears in his eyes.” All this was volunteered by way of making up, after her unconscious offense of sleeping through his earthquake.

Morison’s wife had been a student of his. He was a history professor, and today he concluded the spring term of his survey course, “Europe on the Rise: 1453–1914.” The students customarily applauded the last lecture, and today the applause went on longer, it seemed to him, than usual, wave upon wave, with a warmth and valedictory enthusiasm that kept renewing itself. In a little trough between two waves of applause it came to Morison, smiling and bobbing his gray head uneasily, that this noise was indeed goodbye: his work was essentially done. Though he had written a notable monograph or two and, with a colleague now dead, a general account of the Austrian Empire still considered standard, the revolutionary thesis, the sweeping and unifying insight that would have forever pinned his name to history’s turning wheel, had never come to him. As a young assistant professor he had felt it well within his grasp—a little more study, a sabbatical spent in inspired scribbling at his desk, and he would have it, one of those radical perceptions that in hindsight loom as inevitable as those of a Weber or a Burckhardt. The possibility had been there, fair as a willing young woman, and he failed to nail it. His specialty, Austria-Hungary, had turned out to be a comicopera patchwork, a muddle of “provisional absolutism,” an empire without a coronation ceremony, a reactionary monarchy tottering through a paper blizzard of decrees and concessions, a study in inertia and fragmentation. Yet, for all that, Morison continued to think, a model of human arrangements. The students’ compassionate fond applause was wrapping him up, sealing him into his coffin; his mind had made its run, and at a deep level that his body had yet to detect he was exhausted. He was, with his old-fashioned tweed jacket and gray flannels, his memories of the last good war and of the intellectual gold rush that had come with the GI Bill, his dated “slant” and late-capitalist liberal humanism, himself now history, a flake of consciousness lost within time’s black shale.

A tug of nausea returned with this perception. The applause spattered to a close. Morison gathered his worn lecture notes, the pages frayed with repeated handling and the typed text spidery where second and third thoughts (none of them recent) had spun over the years a web of insertions. Like a person who takes a backache or a love pang onto a crowded bus, Morison moved with his queasiness out among the exiting, pushing students. They were bright-faced and noisy and clad in light rags. June was almost here. A boy in denim cutoffs and a tank top, one of the pushers, seeking professorial intimacy right to the edge of exam period, voiced puzzlement and a disposition to quarrel with the somewhat ironical portrait Morison had painted of a Europe halcyon and the envy of the globe in 1914, until Austria-Hungary’s doddery decision to launch war against Serbia for the sake of an assassinated prince everyone had disliked. “But, sir, what about the poverty and sweatshops? What about the abortive revolutions, like in 1905?” Morison brushed past the boy as if he were shouting in a foreign language. The professor had no heart left for history; his retrospect was obsessed by that immense, subtle tremble in whose arms he had hours ago awoken.

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Sex, Morison thought as the day wore on. Sex was what had slid away. Not the fact of it—his young wife, though she needed her sleep, was less fussily obliging than any woman of Morison’s generation would have been—but the hope, the expectancy that used to draw all days and hours to a point. In his untenured years, he would look forward all day to a dinner party, to seeing Mrs. R. or combative Miss B. or languorous Madame de L. of the Department of Romance Languages in a silk or satin party dress, and watching the skins of such females flush and their gestures widen under the influence of drink and food and what the behavioral scientists called socialization, and hearing their voices rise and grow adorably raucous and reckless. The air then was full of signs, of meanings, of flashing immaterial knives. Now at dinner parties he would sit and be amazed that there was not one woman at the table he wanted to sleep with. It was a kind of deafness, a turning down of the sound on a television set. The mouths around the table moved absurdly, like the mouths of fish. Politely, animatedly even, he and his colleagues—his comitatus—were going through the motions. It was, Morison supposed, what Freud had meant by civilization; no one healthy, really, had ever had much use for it.

Students, too, emitted their signals, their secondary meanings of pose and glance—pitfalls, at times, of delicious hazard. Now the girls in their provoking undress were to Morison like foliage, blandly thronging the sides of his vision as he walked the campus paths. Though only thrice wed, in a profession notorious for its marital casualties, he had been, all those years when the great theory, the seminal statement, waited to be discovered, in a constant fever of love, talking to one female or another in his head incessantly, making her the unwitting witness of his being—his lectures, his conferences, his reading of term papers, his carpentry, his leaf-raking, even his lovemaking to another. Now, if he thought of women, in a moment of silent occupation or while falling off to sleep, it was of his daughters, with great pity and sorrow and, obscurely, self-blame. He had had three, by the first two wives, and all three were adult, and lived alone in tiny rented rooms in various ungrateful cities. When he thought of a daughter, he pictured a pea suspended in the center of an empty cube, waiting to be found, a tiny, hard, slightly shrivelled core of disappointment floating in a room whose one window gave on identical, other windows. The picture had the sadness of a Magritte. So it would startle him, confronting one of his daughters in actuality, to find her large and hearty and solicitous toward *him;* he was aging, he would read in her eyes. To them he appeared a fragile relic of the past they had shared, when they had been giggling babies and he dark-haired and omnipotent. Morison would have wept, if he could weep as easily as Keuschnig, over his daughters.

His daughters and his teeth. A left lower bicuspid, having long ago lost the molar behind it, now was wearying of carrying a gold bridge, and stood with its root all but completely exposed by the eroding jawbone, and felt palpably loose to Morison’s tongue. And he could not stop touching it, testing to what degree the looseness was fact and to what degree morbid illusion—his imagining things, as his wife put it.

In his office, he pawed through stacks of term papers pounded out under the inspiration of cram notes and No-Doz. He made few marginal remarks; these final papers were often not even retrieved, but left to gather dust on a chair in his locked office all summer. Outside, the afternoon glided by with a waxy brilliance. The sky was cloudless, showing heaven’s independence of earth. The motion of the bed this morning, produced by subterranean thunder, in Morison’s mind had become less like a boat sluing, less large: more of a nervous, sharp motion, as if the bedposts had been socketed in cups of grease. His tongue pressed against the weakening tooth once more. There was another dinner party tonight, and his failure to feel excitement seemed another slight softening, an installment of eventual total loss.

Yet it was here, at this party in the home of a younger colleague—a disciple of Braudel deep into the statistics of Midwestern grain and cattle shipment in the 1880s—that she appeared, the exciting woman. She was an unscheduled guest, the visiting sister of a geologist. Slender, tall, her hair a gaudy orange and teased into a compact airy ball around her face, she marched into the room erect as a soldier, chin up and an arm extended before her toward the hostess in a gesture almost balletic, as if her fingers held a wand. No husband accompanied her. To Morison she seemed so precious, so precarious and knifelike a vision in her pale-green sheath of a dress, that he shied from talking to her. Only in the second hour of pre-dinner drinks, the small crowd around her mysteriously dispersing, did they come face to face. Her eyes, like her dress, were pale green, and they fastened on his with an intensity that suggested they had met before, in circumstances that had been discreditable. The tilted-back angle of her bony, bright face looked a little unnatural and tense, up close. “Are you retired?” she asked, unsmiling.

He provided the smile. “Not quite yet. Do I look as though I should be?”

It was her chance to flirt, but she said with a hiss, “Yes.” He changed the subject. “Your brother is a geologist.”

“My brother,” the woman said, “is a bully.” The muscles at the points of her jaw kept jumping, and her long throat was composed of rigid vertical cords.

“I was curious to know what he thought about the earthquake this morning. Has he expressed anything to you? Any theories? Is this the beginning of a cataclysmic trend?”

She said nothing, merely stared at him with a face about to fling itself into outrage; it was as if he were daring to speak to her in a sacred code, as if he were violating the terms of an agreement they had arrived at in secret. Yet she was lovely, Morison noticed, in her bones, the widely spaced cheekbones and jaw points, and in the tilt of her nose and the blooded darkness of her narrow, pink-rimmed nostrils. She was vivid as a wild animal; he needed only to find the tone that would settle her down.

“Did you notice it?” he asked, softer-voiced. “This morning? My lazy wife slept right through, but it was all over television, and the afternoon papers.”

“I don’t want to be here,” this woman in green explained, wagging her jaw slightly from side to side and barely unclenching her teeth, as if afraid of vomiting. “It’s my brother’s idea. I have a lovely home. But my crazy husband—”

“Your husband?”

“He says I shouldn’t talk about it.” For the first time; her eyes left his, and her head swivelled, surveying the room so rapidly her ball of teased hair bounced under the stress of rotation.

“Your husband says?”

“My *brother*.” The corners of her lips, which were very long and somewhat imprecisely painted a purplish red, bent upwards in a cramped attempt at a smile. “He’s taking it from me, my *beau*tiful home, and now my children, oh my God, he has *law*yers, and *doc*tors, he *buys* people, and gets them to *lie—*”

“This is not your brother, this is your husband,” Morison said. It was a stupid, professorial effort to keep things clear, but he was becoming frightened.

The woman looked at him with astonishment. He had the irrational fear her face might fly apart, like an explosion of shrapnel, its cheekbones and nostrils and the eyes that seemed bones of a different color. “You’re wonderful,” she pronounced at last, and silently laughed, a huge ghost of a laugh, her mouth opening wider than he would have thought possible, so that from his angle he saw the ribs of the roof of her mouth and the gutter of black fillings running back through her molars.

She was, he realized, quite mad; her defiant entry into this party, her situation as she described it were suddenly explained, and the mystery of why the people around her had dispersed, leaving Morison to face her. And she, seeing what must have been a change, a slippage, in his own face, tipped back her face in triumph and attached herself to him with a slim, nervous, hard hand. For the rest of the evening, she followed him with her gaze and her voice, seating herself beside him at the table, staring, pleading that he understand her, that the code they had worked out in the fathomless past continue to bind them together and become the basis for her rescue. The vague human appeal that always hangs gaseously in the air of parties had become suffocatingly solid; the ceiling of the room seemed to be lowering and chasing him from corner to corner, from group to group, as the woman circled in her hunt.

“What a nightmarish evening,” Morison said to his wife when at last it was over and they were home.

“She *did* take quite a shine to you,” she said. “Poor soul. Apparently she was quite brilliant and lovely once, and just flipped. Her brother was saying they don’t want to have to do any more shock treatments.”

“I thought nobody did those anymore.” The idea slightly sickened him. Would they shave off her hair? Had that hair been a wig? “It was terrifying,” he confessed, “to realize suddenly that she wasn’t *there*, in the way that people normally are. I must have looked foolish.”

“No more,” she said, “than old guys on the make ever look.” Having mussed her own hair in pulling off her dress, she tossed her head with petulant violence, like a child who doesn’t want her snarls combed out; thus shaken, this hair, blond and long, loosened of its own down her back. In bed, by way of making up, she smoothed his eyebrows, which had grown bushy with the years, and massaged the front of his skull as if to ease the creases from his forehead. “Everybody at the party thought you were heroic,” she said loyally.

This all formed a signal, and Morison wanted to respond, for his wife now seemed a treasure, sleepy but at least sane; but the moment when he should have nailed her, as it were, passed, and she slipped in his arms into forgetfulness of him.

He lay in the wide bed and waited. Though the ceiling had receded to its proper distance, his memory of that mouth, so suddenly, avidly flexible, with its ribbed cave roof and black back teeth, afflicted him. His tongue touched his own tooth, testing the give; perhaps he was imagining it. He thought of Franz Josef, punctilious to the end, arising on the day of his death at three-thirty as usual, for the usual rubdown with cold water by a valet, and donning his medals; feverish, feeble, the world beyond his windows brought to ruin by the disastrous miscarriage of his ultimatum to Serbia, the old monarch examined and signed papers all day at Schönbrunn, though too weak in the evening to kneel to his prayers. Sedl, the bishop of the Hofburg, came at eight-thirty and put the ancient Hapsburg cross to the Emperor’s lips; his mistress, Katherina Schratt, was called too late, and placed on the bed where Franz Josef’s corpse lay two white roses, which were buried with him. Morison thought of his daughters in their empty rooms, and of the thinly populated mountains to the north. Suddenly, the mattress seemed to slue a bit sideways, to give a little flirtatious tug; but the bedlamp didn’t tingle, so he must have imagined it.