# Poker Night

# John Updike

THE PLANT has been working late, with the retailers hustling to get their inventories up for Christmas even though this is only August, so I grabbed a bite on the way to the doctor’s and planned to go straight from there to poker. The wife in fact likes my not coming home now and then; it gives her a chance to skip dinner and give her weight problem a little knock.

The doctor has moved from his old office over on Poplar to one of these new medical centers, located right behind the mall, where for years when I was a kid there was a field where I can remember the Italians growing runner beans on miles and miles of this heavy brown string. The new center is all recessed ceiling lighting and there’s wall-to-wall carpet everywhere and Muzak piped into the waiting room, but if you look at their doors you could put a fist through them easily and can hear the other doctors and patients through the walls, everything they say, including the breathing.

What mine said to me wasn’t good. In fact, every time I tried to get a better grip on it it seemed to get worse.

He provided a lot of cheerful energetic talk about the treatments they have now, the chemotherapy and then cobalt and even something they can do with platinum, but at my age I’ve seen enough people die to know there’s no real stopping it, just a lot of torment on the way. If it wasn’t for company insurance and Medicaid you wonder how many of these expensive hospitals would still be in business.

I said at least I was glad it hadn’t been just my imagination. I asked if he thought it could have been anything to do with any of the chemicals they have to use over at the plant, and he said with this prim mouth how he really couldn’t venture any opinion about that.

He was thinking lawsuit, but I had been just curious. Me, I’ve always figured if it isn’t going to be one thing it’ll be another; in this day and age you can stand out on a street corner waiting for the light to change and inhale enough poison to snuff out a rat.

We made our future appointments and he gave me a wad of prescriptions to get filled. Closing the door, I felt somebody could have put a fist through me pretty easily, too.

But drugstores are bright places, and while waiting I had a Milky Way and leafed through a *People*, and by the time the girl behind the counter had the medicine ready you could tell from her smile and the way the yellow Bic-click stuck out of her smock pocket that nothing too bad was going to happen to me, ever. At least at a certain level of my mind this seemed the case.

Moths were thick as gnats under the streetlights and there was that old sound of summer happiness in the swish of car tires on sticky tar and the teen-agers inside the cars calling out even to people they didn’t know. I got into my own car and after some thinking about it drove in the Heights direction to poker.

I wanted to be sharing this with the wife but then they were counting on me to be the sixth and a few hours couldn’t make much difference. Bad news keeps: isn’t that what the old people used to say?

The group has been meeting every other Wednesday for thirty years, with some comings and goings, people moving away and coming back. We’ve even had some deaths, but up to now none of the regulars, just substitutes—brother-in-laws or neighbors called in to round out the table for just that one night.

It was at Bob’s tonight. Bob’s a framer, in his own shop downtown: it’s amazing what those guys get now, maybe forty, fifty bucks for just some little watercolor somebody’s aunt did as a hobby, or some kid’s high-school diploma.

Jerry does mechanical engineering for an outfit beyond the new mall, Ted’s a partner in a downtown fruit store, Greg manages the plumbing business his father founded way back, Rick’s a high-school guidance counsellor believe it or not, and Arthur’s in sales for Doerner’s Paints and Stains. Arthur had to be on the road tonight, which is why they needed me to make six.

It all began when we were newlyweds more or less starting up our families in the neighborhood between Poplar and Forrest, on the side of the avenue away from what used to be the great old Agawam Wallpaper factory, before they broke it up into little commercial rental units. One April night I got this call from Greg, a guy I hardly knew except everybody knew his old man’s truck.

I thought Alma would make resistance: both Jimmy and Grace must have been under two at the time and she was still trying to give piano lessons in the evenings. But she said go ahead, I’d been working pretty hard and she thought I could use the relaxation.

Now none of us live in the neighborhood except me and Ted, and he talks about moving to a condo now that the kids are out of the house, except he hates the idea of fighting the traffic into town every day. From where he is now he can walk to the fruit store in a blizzard if he has to, and that crazy Josie of his never did learn how to drive.

For years Arthur has been over on the Heights too, about three of these curving streets away from Bob’s place, and Rick is over on the other side of town toward the lake, and Jerry has gone and bought himself some run-down dairy farm south of the mall; he’s fixing up the barn as a rental property, doing most of the work himself on weekends. Also over the years there have been a few changes as to wives and business situations.

But the stakes haven’t changed, and with inflation and our moving more or less up in the world the dimes and quarters and even the dollar bills look like chips, flipping back and forth. It really *is* pretty much relaxation now, with winning more a matter of feeling good than the actual profit.

I arrived maybe ten minutes late because of the wait in the drugstore. The little paper bags in the pocket rattled when I threw my jacket on the sofa and the sound scraped in my stomach, reminding me.

Did you ever have the strong feeling that something *has* to be a dream, and that tomorrow you’ll wake up safe? It used to come to me as a kid, whenever I’d be in real trouble, like the time Lynn Pechilis said she was pregnant or when they caught us stealing the comic books from Woolworth’s.

I got a beer and settled in at the table between Ted and Rick. The five faces, all lit up already with beer and the flow of the cards, looked like balloons, bright pink balloons in that overhead light Bob has rigged up in his den, a naked 100-watt bulb on an extension cord propped up there among the exposed two-by-eights.

He’s been working on his den for years, bringing the ceiling down and the walls in for better insulation. But the framing business keeps him downtown Saturdays as well as evenings, and the plasterboard sheets and lumber and rolls of insulation have been leaning around so long in this den it always gives us something to rib him about.

I thought, *I’ll never see this room finished*. The thought hit me like lead in the gut; but I figured if I sat perfectly quiet and drank the first beer fast the balloons of their faces would slowly take me up with them, to where I could forget my insides.

And it worked, pretty well. The cards began to come to me, under the naked bulb, the aces and deuces and the queens with their beautiful cold faces, and I really only made two mistakes that night.

The one was, I hung on with two pair, jacks and eights, all the way into the dollar-raise stage of a game of seven-card high-low when Jerry had four cards of a straight showing and only two of the nines, the card he needed, were accounted for. But I figured he would *have* to bet as if he had it whether he did or not; as it turned out, he *did* have it, and I wasn’t even second best, since Greg had been sitting there sandbagging with three kings.

The other was, in the last round, when what with the beer the pots really build, I folded a little full house, fives and treys, in a game of Twin Beds, because so many pairs were already out there on the board I figured somebody had to have me beat. I was wrong: Rick won it with an ace-high heart flush.

Can you imagine, winning Twin Beds with a flush? It’s in my character to feel worse about folding a winner than betting a loser; it seems less of a sin against God or Nature or whatever.

Maybe my concentration was off; it did seem silly, at moments, sitting here with these beered-up guys (it gets pretty loud toward the end) playing a game like kids killing a rainy Sunday afternoon when I’d just been told my number was up. The cards at these moments when I thought about it looked incredibly thin: a kind of silver foil beaten to just enough of a thickness to hide the numb reality that was under everything.

My cards as it happened were generally pretty dull, so I had time to look around. The guys’ faces looked like pink balloons but their hands as they reached on the table were another story altogether: they were old guys’ hands, withered long wrinkled white claws with spots and gray hair and stand-up veins.

We had grown old together. We were all drawing near to death, and I guess that was the comfort of it, the rising up with them.

Ted spilled his beer as he tends to do as the evening wears on, reaching for some cards or the popcorn basket or his bifocals (it’s an awkward length: you can see your own cards fine with the short vision but the cards in the middle tend to blur, and vice versa) and everybody howled and kidded him as they always do, and my throat began to go rough, they were all so damn sweet, and I’d known them so damn long, without ever saying much of anything except this clowning around and whose deal was it; maybe that was the sweetness. Their faces blurred and came up in starry points like that out-of-focus thing they do with television cameras now—the false teeth and glasses and the shiny high foreheads where hair had been—and the crazy thought came to me that people wouldn’t mind which it was so much, heaven or hell, as long as their friends went with them.

Ted has these slightly swollen-looking hands, nicked around the fingers and fat at the sides of the palms, from handling the crates I suppose, and you would think, deft as he must have to be every day in the fruit store, picking out plums and tomatoes for the lady customers, he would be the last one of us to be knocking his beer glass over. But he’s always the one, just like Rick is the one to hang in there with junk and Jerry the one to catch that one card in the deck he needs.

I wound up about five dollars down. If I’d had the guts to stay with that little full house I might have been five dollars ahead.

I put on my jacket and the rustling in the pocket reminded me again of the prescriptions and the doctor. Woolworth’s didn’t prosecute, and it turned out Lynn just wanted to give me a scare.

The wife wasn’t up. I didn’t expect her to be, at quarter to twelve.

But she wasn’t asleep, either. She asked me from the bed in the dark how I did.

I said I broke about even. She asked me what the doctor had said.

I asked her if she’d like to come down to the kitchen and talk. I don’t know exactly why I didn’t want anything said in the bedroom, but I didn’t.

She said she’d love to, she had skipped supper tonight and was starving. There was some leftover lasagna in the fridge she could warm in the microwave in a minute; she’d been lying there in the dark thinking about it.

Alma isn’t fat exactly; solid is more how I think of it. When you’re with her in bed, you can feel she still has a waist.

We went downstairs and turned on the light and she in her bathrobe heated the Pyrex dish half full of lasagna and I thought about one more beer and decided against it. Then the lasagna was so hot—amazing, how those microwaves do it; from the inside out, they say, vibrating the molecules—I went and got the beer just to soothe my mouth.

I told her everything as much like the doctor had told me as I could. His exact words, his tone of voice as if it wasn’t him saying this but a kind of pre-recorded announcement; the look of the recessed lights about his examining table and his steel desk and of his fake hardboard wood-grained wainscoting all revived in me as if I’d just come from there, as if I hadn’t been to poker at all.

Alma did and said all the right things, of course. She cried but not so much I’d panic and came up with a lot of sensible talk about second opinions and mysterious remissions and modern medicine and how we’d take it a day at a time and had to have faith.

But she wasn’t me. I was me.

While we were talking across the kitchen table there was a barrier suddenly that I was on one side of and she was on the other, overweight and over fifty as she was, a middle-aged tired woman up after midnight in a powder-blue bathrobe but with these terribly alive dark eyes, suddenly. I had handed her this terrible edge.

You could see it in her face, her mind working. She was considering what she had been dealt; she was thinking how to play her cards.