# Getting into the Set

# John Updike

FOR THE FIRST YEARS that Nick and Katie Higginson lived in the little New England town, they were preoccupied with their house, an early-eighteenth-century saltbox that had been allowed to drift perilously close to complete dilapidation. The beams in the dirt cellar were powdery with dry rot; the lovely old fireplaces, with their wrought-iron spits and inset bake ovens, had been bricked and boarded over. The floors—the irreplaceable broad pine floorboards—had been painted dark hard colors and, in the room that became the Higginsons’ dining room, covered with several layers of linoleum. The house, though not large, had been divided; to accommodate the families that lived in both halves, upstairs rooms had been partitioned, downstairs doors had been removed, and makeshift arrangements of plumbing and wiring had been pushed and cut through the precious old woodwork. Some raised-field panelling had been, incredibly, wallpapered over, and layers of poisonous green paint had all but obscured the beauty of the exquisite shell cupboard to the left of the fireplace in the living room—the house’s gem, with its serpentine shelves and curved back panels, all framed in bolection-molded trim and stop-fluted pilasters. Nick and Katie scraped and refinished, and what they could not do paid others to do. The floors, worn in visible troughs near the doorways and along the central hall, were pried up board by board and relaid and sanded level. A downstairs bathroom was built into the space of an abandoned stairway. Unobtrusive baseboard hot-water heating replaced the ponderous cast-iron radiators, whose paint had been peeled by their own steam; dainty twelve-over-twelve sash windows were restored where a previous owner had barbarously installed casemented Thermopane.

Through her new windows Katie would gaze out at the street, one of the town’s main streets; a block away, the shops began, and people shopping downtown often had to park in front of the Higginsons’. There was, she realized those first years, a set of people in town about her and Nick’s age, who saluted one another on the sidewalk and even embraced, as if a jovial reunion were constantly in progress. They wore, these young adults in their early thirties, a ramshackle and reckless yet well-heeled air; they seemed, in winter sunshine or summer shade, in quilted parkas or cotton shorts, to be always between parties. She and Nick had joined the available organizations, the conservation group and the Congregational church and the historical society, and yet no parties forth-came. She learned the names of some of the set—Brick Matthews and his wife, Felicia; Tory Riddle and her husband, Trevor; the Ledyards, Joan and Kenneth—but not the way in.

Katie was a tall woman with a high glossy forehead that made her seem somewhat brittle and prim. Yet her figure was good, and her spirit unsatisfied. She had married Nick when she was only twenty, not finishing college, and two children, a boy and a girl, had arrived rapidly, exhausting her breeding instinct. Now that both children were in school, her days stretched long; she had taken to doing household tasks better suited to an elderly spinster. Nick’s parents had died rather prematurely, leaving the young couple a great deal of handsome antique furniture, including a mahogany double-pedestal-base dining table and six Chippendale dining chairs whose old crewelwork seats had over the years become threadbare and stained. Katie picked six harmonizing but not identical floral needlepoint patterns and set about the long task of executing them—as if she needed some endless chore to fill the time between now and the grave. Nick had found such a chore for himself: he was paving the old cellar, mixing a few bags of sand and cement at a time, often descending after dinner and coming up, begrimed and blinking, well after Katie, wearied by the nightly rituals of putting the children to bed, had herself fallen asleep. The needlepointing hurt her eyes after an hour, but at her tender age she was resisting getting close-distance glasses.

The children made possible the first step, on the beach. Katie’s confidence was enhanced in a bathing suit; furthermore, there was a kind of emboldening democracy at the beach, so sunstruck and broad and murmurous. The tame tumult of its surf merged in the ear with the hum of bathers, the hundreds of exclamations and conversations all testifying to some central treasure, some hidden honey. Her eight-year-old, Chris, had joined another boy in building a sand castle; this boy, when the castle was undermined by a lunge of the tide, joined a group of children and mothers that included Felicia Matthews and Joan Ledyard. Chris followed his new friend into their midst, and Katie hesitantly trailed after him, in case he was being a nuisance. “Not at all,” the elegantly brown Matthews woman told her, staring upwards with eyes scrunched small as diamonds in the sun.

There were several young mothers Katie didn’t know by sight, and she felt ungainly, standing. She was putting the others in her shadow. “Sit down if you’d like,” the Ledyard woman said, after a pause in which, Katie imagined, a silent debate had been held in the air. Katie sat inelegantly on the damp sand and listened as the other women chattered. Chris soon got bored; the boy whose castle he had helped build ignored him in favor of the more familiar playmates who clustered in this nest of beach chairs and reclining women. When Chris rejoined his sister, on a distant blanket, his mother had to follow. Katie tried to express in her goodbyes how grateful she was for these ten minutes of shared company; the responding farewells sounded faint and perfunctory, like wind chimes.

But a step had been made. She described, that evening, the encounter to Nick. “They seemed just terribly nice, and quite funny, really, their way of putting things.”

“For example.”

“Oh, I don’t know, it’s hard to remember. A lot of it has to do with the tone of voice. The way Felicia called her husband ‘the old man,’ and spoke of her children as ‘the littles.’ It doesn’t sound so funny when I say it, but in the context …”

“O.K.,” Nick said, anxious to get to his basement. Though fearful of rats, she had more than once gone down the cellar steps with him and tried to share his delight and sense of gradual triumph, each day’s gobs hardened by next day into an adamant gray chunk of floor. It was like an army—his army of particles, consolidating, spreading to all the dark, cobwebbed corners. The foundation of the house had been made of fieldstones, laid up without mortar, and after the floor was finished Nick intended to cement and point all these stones, fixing them in place rigidly.

Now at the beach Katie sometimes dared sit with one or two of the wives of the set, if there were not too many. A group bigger than three she declined to join, imagining that she was winning points with her tact. Even when there were just two or three, she was aware of worlds of allusion that her presence was suppressing, allusions to scandals brewing or brewed, to gatherings that had taken place or would take place. The set in season played tennis and paddle tennis, went sailing and skiing and picnicking. In the late spring, Katie had gathered, there was an annual canoe trip down the river as far as the factory and the falls, and on Sundays in the autumn, the men played touch football in somebody’s field. “Oh, Nick played football in high school!” she volunteered one August day, when the subject had slipped into conversation; over these summer weeks Felicia and Tory and Joan had become a bit careless of their gossip in her presence. Katie had once regaled them with a word-picture of Nick and his basement and, since a comic husband seemed to be a ticket to acceptance by these women, she offered it again. “He played a floating end, or whatever they call those people who aren’t very strong and can’t throw the ball, either.”

There was a silence, washed across by the desultory sounds of the dying summer—the waves becalmed, the crowds thinned. “They may not be doing it this year,” Joan Ledyard at last said. “They’re all a year older.”

“But if they do and need somebody,” Katie persisted, blushing at her own shamelessness, “they should call Nick; it would be so *good* for him.”

When, a month later, the call did come, Katie was startled, even frightened, by the gravelly, barking man’s voice at the other end of the line. He didn’t identify himself and asked for Nick; she called her husband up from the cellar. Nick spoke to the man in grudging monosyllables. “Who on earth was it?” Katie asked when he had hung up.

His eyes, she thought, looked fishy behind the plastic goggles he wore to protect them from cement dust. “Some guy called Trevor Riddle. He’d heard I’d like to play touch football. I don’t know where he got that idea; I hate the damn game. I nearly got my neck broken playing football in high school.”

“You didn’t say no!”

“You heard me talking. I thanked him and said I’d keep it in mind. That’s as good as saying no.”

Katie was determined not to cry, though she felt as if a door had been slammed in her face. Nick lifted his goggles to see her better; she flounced away. That night, she dressed for bed not in the sheer persimmon-colored shortie that he liked and that was something of a Saturday-night tradition for them, but in the long-sleeved flannel nightgown he said made her look like an old lady.

The next day turned out to be an invitingly brisk September Sunday, with the smell of apples and hay in the air. After lunch, though he had promised the children a bicycle ride, Nick put on some old corduroys and a sweatshirt and his jogging shoes, and went off to play touch football. When he came back, he was limping; he had sprained his ankle. Also, his speech was slightly loud and slurred. There had been drinks, afterwards, at someone’s house. Again, Katie resisted tears; she had not been invited. He explained, “Only some of the wives came, and others weren’t there; I couldn’t figure out the system, and figured I’d have a quick sip and be right home. Then I got to talking to some guy called Leadman, Leadbelly …”

“Ken Ledyard.”

“Right. About siding. He says they have a new Fiberglas clapboard now that breathes just like wood.”

“Nick, you’re drunk, and you’re not going to ruin this lovely old house with Fiberglas siding! It’s bad enough what you’ve done in the basement, smothering all the nice old dirt!” She dashed from the room as if to hide tears; but in truth she had remembered that she had turned down the lamb in the oven when Nick was so late coming home. It needed to be turned up again. And Katie needed to be alone with her new information, and to contemplate her next step.

“You should offer to have drinks here,” she told Nick one Sunday after he had hobbled home with grassy knees and glazed eyes. The post-football drinks rotated from house to house, he reported; he had been playing for six weeks, and it was nearly November. “I don’t know,” he said. “It might seem pushy.”

“Why wouldn’t it just seem courteous?”

“They seem pretty happy with things the way they are.”

“It’s all very well for you to say—you see them every week.”

“They’re not so great, actually. Kind of noisy and silly, really, and can’t talk about anything except each other. Why don’t you just come over sometime, toward the end of the game, and watch, and then tag along? A lot of the wives do that. I made a terrific catch today, you should have seen it—over the shoulder, running full tilt.”

“I wouldn’t *dream* of going anywhere where I wasn’t invited.”

“They don’t really in*vite*, you know. It’s just who’s there, and what develops.”

“Oh, you’re so *in* it’s killing. You could invite them next Sunday for the following.”

“Well … it’s awkward.”

“Exactly. Awkward is just how I find it, too,” Katie said, feeling her angry blush rise from her cheeks, through her forehead to her hairline.

The next Sunday he reported, “Brick Matthews said it sounded nice, but he wasn’t sure there’d still be touch football. It depends on the frost. They don’t like to play once there’s frost in the ground; it gets too slippery.”

“It sounds to me,” Katie said, “that it’s Brick Matthews who’s slippery. There’s plenty of lovely weather left, right through Thanksgiving. I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want them to come. They’re *your* friends—you go take them all to the bar at the Amvets.”

The next Sunday afternoon, however, just in case, she tidied up the downstairs and prettily improvised a bar in the shell cupboard, with newly bought bottles and plastic glasses and paper cocktail napkins. The needlepoint was beginning to sting her eyes in the dusk, when the porch resounded with many heavy footsteps. The house trembled. Then there was a clamorous rapping of the door knocker, insistent and rude; but she opened the door smilingly. Nick, pale-faced and standing on one leg, was being supported between two large, muddy, red-faced men. “He’s sprained it again,” she said, before any of them could speak. More cars were drawing up to the curb, releasing men in sneakers and wives in quilted parkas and wool slacks. November had turned cold; there had been frost for several nights. This crowd stood on the sidewalk, staring up at the house—its many-mullioned shiny new windows, its freshly painted and gilded blue-and-gold eagle plaque above the formal Georgian doorway—while the party on the porch negotiated.

“It may be worse than that,” one of the men supporting Nick told her, with a sheepish air of collusion. His was the rough voice that had alarmed Katie over the phone: Trevor Riddle.

“I heard something snap,” Nick said in that irritating whine he put on when he had a cold or a bad day at work. “Turned to make a catch and some clumsy bastard plowed right into me.”

“That was me,” the other supporting man explained. Katie recognized him, belatedly, as Brick Matthews; she had only seen him before at the historical society, in a three-piece gray business suit. Now he was wearing a dirty yellow cable-knit sweater and his hair stood out all around his head in stiff cedar-colored curls. “I tried to cut back, and slipped on the mud. The frost, you know, gets into the ground, and then it melts on the top.”

“I’m sure it’s just that same sprain,” Katie said. “Why don’t you all come in for a drink?”

Entering the house, the men seemed enormous, scarcely a one under six feet and all exuding animal warmth and a confident tang of sweat. The women, too, out of their bathing suits and into sweaters, bulked larger than Katie remembered. They moved toward the bar in a herd. While she rushed into the kitchen to replenish the ice, Tory Riddle and a dark-haired woman she didn’t know fussed over Nick, setting him up in the bargello wing chair and easing under his wounded ankle the silk-covered Newport footstool with the cabriole legs. Inherited furniture that, because of its desiccated delicacy, Nick and Katie rarely used was suddenly thrust this way and that under a surge of friendly bodies. Two canework side chairs were brought forward from their basically ornamental position flanking the veneered card table that stood with half of its round folding top leaning silhouetted against the wall. The dark japanned chest that rested beneath one window, and off of whose golden, ghostly scene of men with bows and arrows hunting a maneless lion Katie was always clearing newspapers that Nick carelessly left there, now offered a perch for Joan Ledyard, who was using the little Minton porcelain basket as an ashtray. Neither Nick nor Katie smoked; suddenly there was a widespread need for ashtrays. Some of the men even puffed big cigars. On her way to the kitchen to look for suitable receptacles, she saw that the party had spilled over into the dining room, and that several wet rings were already whitening the table’s mahogany surface while Felicia Matthews and some tall man whose name Katie didn’t know were huddled close in conversation. As she was hurrying back down the hall with a paper towel, a tablecloth, and some saucers for ashtrays, Brick Matthews locked his furry hand around her forearm. “Why don’t you have a drink and relax?” he asked.

Something about him made her leap into *non sequiturs*. “I’m so worried about Nick,” she said. “Suppose his ankle is broken, like he said?”

“Suppose it is; another hour won’t make any difference. He’s on his second drink and feeling no pain. What about you?”

“Me?” Her thought was still aimed at wiping those rings before they sank into the finish.

“All summer my wife’s been raving to me about what a terrific figure this woman has down at the beach.”

“If you’re looking for your wife, she’s in the dining room talking to somebody.”

“Don’t I know it. What can I get you, Katie?”

“Get me?” He was one of those men whose chest hair comes up very high; above the neck of his sweatshirt there was a froth the color of pencil shavings.

“G-and-t, whiskey, Bloody Mary …”

“Just a white-wine spritzer,” she said. “Very weak.”

“I might have guessed,” he said, with cheerful disgust, and did not follow her into the dining room. Felicia’s conversation in there had deepened; averting her face as the tall, sulky-looking man poured words into her ear, she was plucking petals from the bowl of chrysanthemums Katie had arranged as a centerpiece and was rolling them into thin tubes she dropped one by one on the tabletop. Katie quickly, apologetically spread the cloth over the mess and retreated to the living room.

A thick blue stratum of tobacco smoke hung beneath the newly plastered ceiling. The noise level had risen; the touch-football game was being replayed in one conversation, and the recent town election was being deplored in another. The two children had come downstairs from watching television and stood like tiny guards, bewildered but watchful, by the arms of Nick’s wing chair. He looked up with a glazed smile while Trevor Riddle’s harsh guffaw soared above him; the joke must have been at Nick’s expense, for he reluctantly joined in. The noise, Katie thought, was like that hive of voices at the beach, brought closer and pressed against the ear. Brick Matthews handed her a wineglass of pale fluid that the first taste proved to be not a spritzer but a Martini. “White wine’s all gone,” he told her.

“How awful; let me look in the fridge.”

“Relax. I already did. Ken’s gone home for some, and another fifth of gin. Now, tell me what you do to keep in such great shape.”

“I do needlepoint,” she said, knowing the reaction this would get, but minding less than she would have even an hour ago his hot, forced laugh, his determined effort to get her gaze to meet his watery eyes, his slightly painful grip on her forearm. She downed the Martini quickly, since she hated the taste, and stood at the side of several excited conversations to which she had nothing to contribute. Another Martini was handed to her, and she began to have things to say. Time speeded up, so that though some people left, and others seemed to rearrive, and she later remembered herself taking the children upstairs and tucking them in, it felt like an abrupt miracle that nine o’clock had come to the brass face of the tall walnut case clock that Nick’s great-grandfather had once brought from Philadelphia. Nick was no longer in the flame-stitched wing chair. Only the dark-haired woman was left in the living room. She had exotic olive skin, as even in color as if painted on. She introduced herself to Katie with a firm handshake: “I’m Vivian Crewes. My husband has been in the dining room all this time. Brick’s going to round them up so we can all go. You’ve been wonderful. This is such a lovely house, and you’ve done such good things with it. I do hope Nickie’s trip to the hospital doesn’t produce any bad news.”

“Nick’s at the hospital?”

“I think you were in the kitchen trying to get the ice-maker to work. The swelling seemed to be getting worse, and he was losing feeling in the toes. Ken Ledyard took him, in the Matthewses’ car, since Joan had to go home and feed the children.”

From the dining room came a spurt of muffled male grunts, and then a crash, a sound of wood sliding and breaking, followed by the somehow dispassionate tinkle of glass. Katie tried to move through her alcoholic laziness to see what the damage was, but the hallway was blocked by Brick Matthews, dragging something behind him that turned out to be Felicia. He had seized her by one arm and she was bumping along on her bottom, her heels kicking at the pine floor as she writhed to regain her feet. Brick winked at Katie. “My wife loves parties,” he said. “I always have to drag her away.” The joke made, he allowed Felicia to get to her feet; he kept squinting on one side of his big red face, in case she decided to hit him.

The tall man followed them. He was caressing his mouth; his lips were pouting and possibly bruised. “The awfullest thing is, dear,” he told his own wife, “we all have to go in our car, since the damn fools gave Ken theirs!”

The dark-haired woman squeezed one of Katie’s hands between her two; her olive hands were thin and cool yet tremulous, as if propelled by the pulse of a hummingbird. “Please excuse us,” she said. “This was darling. You and Nick must come to our house, soon.”

The last car roared away from the curb, where Katie had more than once seen members of the set embrace. Where Felicia’s heels had kicked the soft old pine boards there were long gray dents. In the dining room, the woman’s agitation had consumed a whole chrysanthemum, its petals turned into tubes that littered the tablecloth. The cloth had been tugged to one side, and wet plastic glasses and a quarter of a lime rested on the luminous wood. One of the Chippendale chairs, one of the two with a completed needlepoint covering, had been knocked onto its side by the men’s struggle and, worse, the new window had buckled: several of the fine “period” mullions, specially milled, had snapped and three panes of glass had broken.

In the living room, where the smell of smoke would cling to the draperies for weeks, the damage was subtler. Salted peanuts and chips for the onion dip had been dropped and heedlessly ground into Nick’s mother’s lovely old blue Tabriz. The men had all been wearing these running shoes with patterned soles that pack dirt between their little cleats, and everywhere, on the rug and the wide pine floorboards, were grid prints and crumbs of dried mud. The japanned chest, sure enough, showed a crack in its heavily varnished lid, cutting across the floating golden mountains. The silk cushion of the footstool was soaked from melted ice applied to Nick’s ankle.

The ash-laden saucers could be emptied and washed and the plastic glasses picked up and thrown away, but what of the cigarette burns? Not one but several people, getting drinks for themselves at the bar set up in the shell cupboard, had put down cigarettes and let them burn past the molded serpentine edges of the reddish pearwood shelves. There were so many of these charred lines in a row it seemed a game had been played, or an initiation rite enacted. Katie knew every curved inch of these shelves; she and Nick had spent hours at the cupboard, their heads swimming with the fumes of paint remover, the careful scraping of their tools the only sound between them. She turned, to face the wrecked room with hot eyes. The tears could come now, now that they were tears of happiness.