# The Wallet

# John Updike

FULHAM had assembled a nice life—blue-eyed wife still presentable and trim after thirty-three years of marriage, red-haired daughter off in the world and doing well, handsome white house in one of the older suburbs—yet the darkness was not quite sealed out. Dread would attack him, curiously, in movie theatres, during the showing of escapist kiddie films at that. He had, at the age of sixty-five, an eleven-year-old grandson, Tod, and a nine-year-old granddaughter, Antoinette, and on those not uncommon weekends when the grandparents were asked to babysit, his contribution to the entertainment would be to take them to a Saturday- or Sunday-afternoon movie.

The theatre complex at the nearby mall had been built as four theatres, and then further partitioned to make six; the walls, masked by giant psychedelic drapes, were so insubstantial that the rumble of one film’s climax easily penetrated into the hushed moments of another. For some reason of constructional economy the movie screens were not exactly square to the rows of seats, and the audiences therefore settled to one side of the theatre, like passengers on a cruise ship at sunset. These viewing conditions constituted just enough hardship to amuse Fulham, along with the remarkable stickiness of the floors, which were so saturated in spilled soft drink as to release the soles of his shoes with an audible snap. He was also amused by the remarkable youth of the other moviegoers—gum-chewing, frizzy-haired girls in stencilled T-shirts and buttock-hugging cutoffs, and boys the menace of whose ragged tank tops and punk haircuts was belied by an androgynous softness of form and a quizzical mildness of expression worlds removed from the truly menacing, Depression-hardened toughs of the aging man’s own youth.

His moviegoing had begun in a small Massachusetts town, in a theatre with vaguely Mexican decor and huge fake organ pipes. Since his parents worked late in the family drugstore, he went to the movies a great deal; he even had a favorite seat—back row, extreme left—and a famous laugh. Older people he scarcely knew would tell his parents over the drugstore counter that their boy had been at the show last night, they had heard him. He loved the black-and-white world that Hollywood manufactured in those years; he took pleasure in following the minor actors, Guy Kibbee and Edward Everett Horton and Adolphe Menjou and Charles Coburn, from role to role, a huge family of familiar, avuncular faces and rapid, mock-furious voices. Then Fulham’s moviegoing had shifted to the khaki-filled rec halls of Southern army bases and, during his Boston days of college and courtship, to art-film houses where one waited in espresso-scented lobbies to absorb the latest postwar bulletins from the troubled spirits of Bergman and Antonioni, Fellini and Buñuel. With marriage and children and the advent of television, Fulham became ever more homebound, one more member of that vast lost audience which Hollywood at first courted with desperate displays of skin and blood and finally quite abandoned. Sitting drowsily with his wife through some chopped, commercial-riddled rerun of a film they had both sentimentally cherished, Fulham was struck by how feeble and cynically mechanical these pre–wide-screen classics were, these creaky old vehicles that once had lifted him far out of himself and whose high moments had lingered in millions of brains like his in lieu of religious visions.

The world is pitched toward the ignorant young, he could only realize now that he was no longer young. In the company of his grandchildren he went to movies rated G or PG—lavishly engineered romances involving spaceships and slapstick, special effects and mystical puppets, with abrupt allusions to marijuana and sex tossed in, Fulham supposed, to flatter the teen-agers in the audience. His prepubescent grandson laughed hard at these naughty bits, with a piercing eager laugh that reminded Fulham of his childish own, while the little girl, robotically feeding popcorn into her face, refused to smile at what she did not understand. She had inherited her mother’s very fine, shiny, carrot-colored hair.

Sitting between these small heads in the flickering light, while on the screen some mechanical dragon unfolded its wings or starships did special-effects battle with supposed laser beams, Fulham would be visited by terror: the walls of the theatre would fall away, the sticky floor become a chasm beneath his feet. His true situation in time and space would be revealed to him: a speck of consciousness now into its seventh decade, a mortal body poised to rejoin the minerals, a member of a lost civilization that once existed on a sliding continent. The curvature of the immense Earth beneath his chair and the solidity of the piece of earth that would cover Fulham’s grave would become suffocatingly real to him, all in an instant; he would begin to sweat. There was a *seriousness* to human existence, an absolute irreversibility, from which all our social arrangements and entertainments attempt to divert us. No, there was no “us” to it, no “our”—it was *his* existence, his in his totally lonely possession of it, that was so sickeningly serious.

Why? Why should he be afflicted here? The images and music emanating from the screen were somehow the means of conveying to his apprehension these leaden, unbearable truths. Movies had always been realler than life to him, bright gaps in the daily, dutiful fog. These “kiddie” movies were coarsely mythic; they portrayed other worlds, he reasoned, and death, toward which he was headed, was another world. All these films had in them episodes involving heights, great spaces, places one might never get back from. To be out there, among the stars! One of his earliest memories was a fear of not getting home on time, of being stuck in a wrong place. His mother had been a tyrannical worrier, his dose-measuring father a fiend for punctuality. Now Fulham had few years left to live, and here he was in a sticky movie house, wasting a priceless afternoon, when he could have been trimming his bushes or bringing his accounts up to date. Such self-analysis slowly diluted the premonition of extinction thrust upon him as he sat sunk between his grandchildren, with their towering life expectancies. By the time the villains had all been detonated and the credits were rolling and the lights came on, Fulham had nursed himself back to the appearance and manner of a normal, cheerful grandfather.

Tod would then beg for a quarter to play a video game in the lobby. Fulham marvelled at the dexterity with which the child manipulated the swift electronic phantoms as they beeped and buzzed. Today, he cajoled his grandfather into playing. “You play, Grandpa.”

“I’d just as soon not, thank you kindly.”

“Ah, go ahead. Give yourself a cheap thrill.”

“Grandpa doesn’t want to,” Antoinette interposed. “He doesn’t feel well.”

“Who says I don’t feel well?”

The little girl solemnly considered him, with her shiny eyes, beneath her shiny hair. “You look sick to your stomach,” she said.

His abdominal muscles did ache, as if he had lifted something heavy. “Maybe I need some fun,” he admitted.

She shrugged, and her brother showed Fulham how to operate the controls. But Fulham’s little screened fighter ship, a triangular thing like a bit of luminous origami, got stuck in a corner, and nothing he could do with the confusingly numerous knobs moved it away. Instead, it twirled like a trapped animal, and when it fired its guns was annihilated by its own ricocheting rays. Shrill little Tod screamed with disbelieving hilarity. GAME CONCLUDED, the screen announced.

Fulham didn’t see what was quite so funny. People in the lobby had turned their heads toward Tod’s conspicuous laugh. Fulham was sweating again, and it took him some seconds to realize that the small insistent face, as round and white and incisively marked as the face of a clock, had chimed something up at him: he was being asked for another quarter. “Come on, Grandpa. It’s only two bits,” the child demanded.

“No,” Fulham said, with considerable satisfaction, and led the children to his car and home. By the time his own child showed up with her husband, both young adults rosy-faced and loud from their tennis match or cocktail party, he was glad to see the grandchildren taken away, and his large white house in Wellesley returned to the order that he and his wife maintained.

With a history of hypertension, Fulham had taken early retirement from his brokerage firm, and managed his own investments and those of a favored few old clients in an upstairs room. He went to this room, overlooking his side yard’s trimmed shrubs, every morning with his *Wall Street Journal* and second cup of decaffeinated coffee. He kept up his charts and his correspondence, made his phone calls and a daily visit to the post office; but the illusion of integration with the larger circuits of the world was harder to maintain than when he enjoyed a corner office on the nineteenth floor of a Boston skyscraper, with swift-moving secretaries to shield and buttress him and to turn his hesitant murmurs of dictation into official communications, on engraved company stationery. Now that the postmen of an increasingly lazy and insolent government were no longer permitted to walk up to a doorway more than a specified distance from the sidewalk, his mail came to him in a tin box down by his white picket fence, and this casual and hazardous housing somehow made additional light of the old pomp of finance.

For some days he had been expecting a large check, which the sender, a Houston oil company, had not chosen to send by registered mail or any of the express services now available. The check, in the low six figures, represented considerable acumen and initial investment on Fulham’s part, and he was anxious to stow it away in one of his bank accounts. Every noon, after the mailman—a young man who with annoying musicality whistled opera arias as he strolled along—had banged shut the lid of the box, Fulham hurried down the long brick walk to discover, amid the wads of bills and fourth-class solicitations, if the check had come. It had not, day after day. Standing by the mailbox, he could feel his heart thudding, annoyingly, like one of those large trucks that, defying a clearly posted sign, went by every now and then on their quiet street, making the house shudder. A week passed, and then another. Phone calls to Houston produced only a series of drawling assurances that the check had been mailed and had not been cashed, and undoubtedly it would show up. One lady, who from the resonant lilt of her voice seemed to be black and, like the mailman, excessively musical, even explained to him that the company never registered checks, on the theory that this called attention to them and in some cases had instigated thievery, among the poorer class of postal workers.

The possibility of thievery had not in so many words occurred to Fulham; he had always thought of the postal service as an overarching entity, like the cloud pattern projected nightly on Channel 5, which, however unpredictable, in the last analysis inevitably delivers every bit of vapor entrusted to it. Now the possibility had been raised that the system had holes in it, through one of which had fallen a sum of money that should be his, numbers that should already be punched into his bank’s computer and generating interest for his account. Each day that the check didn’t arrive, he computed, he was losing more money than it cost him and his wife to eat. His calls to Houston rose in pitch of insistence, and his comforters correspondingly rose in the company’s hierarchy, urging him, however, in the end, to wait a few more days before asking them—as was his privilege, of course—to stop the check and issue another.

He slept poorly, agitated by the injustice of it. There was no one to blame and no court in which to place an appeal—just an impenetrable delivery system stretched airily between New England and Texas. Awake at odd hours, he imagined footsteps softly passing on the sidewalk and hands rattling at his mailbox. The box itself, substituted by governmental decree for his infallibly retentive front-door letter slot, seemed a perilous extension of himself, an indefensible outpost, subject to graffiti and casual battering. He tried to imagine in detail the processes of the mails—the belts, the sacks, the shufflings, the sorting machines that fling envelopes heedlessly in all directions. He yearned to seize and shake that vast imagined system, to shake loose that stuck small fortune so blithely confided to a scrap of paper within another, folded, scrap. The wish to shake shook him; Fulham’s pulpy, intimidated heart filled his skull, the bed, and the bedroom with its thumping.

His wife, woken by his furious rotation beneath the covers, couldn’t grasp the problem, the indignity. Each day, she still ate three thoughtfully chosen and prettily prepared meals; she still tended her garden in the milky morning cool of these late-summer days and then went over to the club for lunch and a swim or nine holes with her giggling, brown-legged, female foursome. For Diane, perhaps there was no abyss. She had been a schoolteacher, forty years ago, inculcating young minds with the lessons of cause and effect and of patience. “The man said,” she reminded Fulham in the middle of the night, “that if it didn’t show up in a few more days they’d cancel it and mail another.”

“That means waiting *more* days. I should be getting interest on that amount.”

“Do we need the interest so badly?”

“It’s not a question of *need*, it’s a question of *right*. We have a right to that money. Furthermore, every day that check is uncashed, the company is drawing interest on its undiminished balance. Not only are we losing a profit, they’re *gain*ing one, thanks to their own inefficiency!”

“I think you’re making too much of it. There’s no issue involved, it’s just one of those things. It got on the bottom of a mail sack somewhere.”

She thus managed in her soothing effort to stumble on the very wasps’ nest of imagery that infuriated him: the letter lost, at the bottom of a sack, forever; the flaw in the mindless system; the outrage without a perpetrator, or at least any perpetrator who could be discovered, who would declare himself; a certain horrible smugness within the Actual, imperfect and blundering though it was; an outrageous cosmic *unanswerableness*.

The perpetrator struck again, inside the home. Waking on Friday morning, Fulham discovered that his wallet was not on the top of his bureau, where he almost invariably put it upon retiring. He looked in the hip pocket of the pants he had worn the day before, and then, with growing desperation, on the closet floor, under the bed, in the bedside table, on the bathroom sink, into the pockets of all his pants hanging in the closets, and, insanely, all the pockets of all his coats, even those which had been hanging in dry-cleaning bags since June.

For the years and decades of his urban employment, Fulham had carried a breast wallet, a small leather shield above his heart, gradually thickening with the years. In his retirement, he wore coats only to go out at night, and so, in a minor rite of passage, a slight change of armor, he bought a hip wallet, to go with his new working uniform of slacks and sports shirt. Strange and forgettable at first, and a little unbalancing, the wallet soon came to feel like a friendly adjunct to his person, a reminder, in its delicate pressure upon his left buttock, of his new, freer, stage of life. It was, the wallet, almost too plump to sit upon, containing plastic charge cards for Bay-Bank, NYNEX, Brooks Brothers, Hertz, Visa, Amoco, American Express, MasterCharge, The Harvard Coop, Filene’s, the Newton-Wellesley Hospital, and Massachusetts General Hospital, plus his plasticized driver’s license and paper cards signifying his membership in the Museum of Fine Arts, the Athenaeum, the Wellesley Country Club, the Tavern Club, the Harvard Club, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and Social Security. Fulham was a sentimental and retentive man; the wallet also held, in its insert of transparent leaves, photos of his wife, daughter, and two grandchildren, and, in its various leather pockets, a card showing his last draft classification (5-A), his insurance agent’s business card, six business cards of his own, a yellowed newspaper clipping recording his victory many years ago in an intercollegiate tennis championship, and a little brown photograph, taken in a booth at the Topsfield Fair, of a seventeen-year-old girl, with bangs, and dark lipstick, whom he had once loved. There were also a number of obsolete receipts (for film left at the drugstore, dry cleaning, a lawn mower to be sharpened, a watch to be repaired) and perhaps sixty dollars in cash.

The cash was the least of it; it was the other things—the irreplaceable mementos, the credit cards that were infinitely tedious to replace—whose disappearance he could not endure, could not encompass. He methodically, yet with that frantic undercurrent which defeats method, searched the large house, checking the bathroom floors, the creases behind sofa cushions, the drawers of his desk, the spaces above the books in the library. Fulham knew that on rare occasions, semi-consciously, he would find the wallet’s bulk bothersome and take it from his pocket to set it on a convenient surface. He went over the quiet events of the evening before, fishing them up from his aging gray cells: dinner, a walk out into the garden to admire the late roses and the first turning leaves, a little time spent in the library leafing through the latest issue of *Barron’s*, a half-hour watching, with Diane, a rerun of an old movie, *Silk Stockings*, with Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse. The production numbers lacked grandeur on the little screen and the plot spun painfully between them. He had forgotten how high Astaire’s voice was, how slight. And Charisse, whom he had also once loved, looked stiff and uneasy under the burden of her fake Russian accent. They should have left it all on Broadway, as *Ninotchka*. Fulham had gone to bed ahead of his wife, undressing, as best he could remember, in his usual pattern, and reading himself into nodding with an Agatha Christie he may have read decades before; faint sensations of *déjà vu* teased the edges of his dissolving consciousness, as Poirot paced off precise distances in the murder-stricken drawing room.

In the morning, he recalled that there had been, between the times in the library and the television room, a call from his daughter, saying they were bringing the children over early in the morning so she and Rob could drive to Providence for a Sam Shepard play they were dying to see and then spend the night with a couple they knew in Rumford. Fulham went to the spot where he had answered the call, a nook of many small shelves just off the kitchen. Suddenly inspired, he deduced that here, amid the leaning cookbooks and rarely used hors-d’oeuvre plates, was where his wallet had to be; indeed, he *saw* it—fat, brown, with corners rubbed pale and the shape of a credit card denting the leather as sometimes a woman’s underpants show in shallow relief through a very tight dress—and emitted a small crow of triumph before realizing that what he took for the wallet was an old out-of-date address book that Diane had not bothered to throw away. His hallucination rattled him and doubled the fury with which he searched the house, room by room, corner by corner. The wallet had ceased to exist.

“It’s been stolen,” he told his wife at lunch.

Diane had a calm patrician face, and when she lifted her chin and thus pulled smooth the loose flesh beneath, it was still beautiful, her abundant hair so utterly white as to seem an expensively sought-after effect. “How could it have been?”

“Easy. The house is big enough anybody could slip in and out in a minute without our knowing. Anyway, it’s not up to me to figure out how to do it, it’s up to *them*. And they’ve done it. The bastards have done it and I’m going to have to cancel every goddamn credit card.”

She looked at him coolly, giving him her full attention for once, and said, “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“How am I?”

“You’re wild.”

“It was my *wallet*. Everything is in it. Everything. Without that wallet, I’m nothing.” His tongue had outraced his brain, but once he said it he realized this to be true: without the wallet, he was a phantom, flitting about in a house without walls. “And I know *why* they took it,” he went on. “To get the bank card. With that bank card they can now deposit and draw on that check they stole earlier.”

“Deposit it in your own account?”

“And then transfer it to their own, somehow. I don’t know, I don’t know how criminals do their work exactly; that’s *their* job. I do know that with these computers there’s no more common sense in banking—a wino off the street can walk away with ten thousand dollars if he knows how to satisfy the idiotic machine. People and institutions are being—what’s the phrase these kids have?—ripped off all the time. We ourselves have just been ripped off of—” He named the amount of the lost check from Houston and her blue eyes went round as she began to believe him. “Don’t you see?” Fulham pressed. “The check, and now the wallet—it’s too much of a coincidence.”

“I can’t believe,” Diane said weakly, “it’s as simple as you make it sound, with all these safeguards—our code word, for instance.”

He scoffed: “Hundreds of people know our code word by now—all the employees at the bank, and anybody who’s ever stood behind us in line.” It was irrefutably clear to him that forces out there, beyond the horizon of towering beech trees and snug slate roofs, had silently, invisibly conspired to invade his domain and steal all his treasure. Every door and window, even the little apertures of the mail slot and the telephone, were holes through which his possessions, the accumulations of a lifetime, were being pulled from him. Ruinously the world has cast property into the form of nebulous, mechanized fluidity. The cards in the missing wallet opened into slippery tunnels of credit, veins of his blood. Fulham stood, feeling drained and faint. “I’m going to call Houston and stop the check,” he told his wife. “Then the bank and freeze my account.”

She nodded, lowering her eyes to guide her fork while its side sliced the lettuce leaves beneath her scoop of cottage cheese.

Even as he acted, Fulham knew, his enemies, armed with his wallet, were running up giant bills—buying cars, clothes, front-seat theatre tickets, mockingly extravagant meals. Yet the girls he talked to that Friday afternoon counselled delay; they all sounded seventeen, with placid, gum-chewing voices. As a group, they seemed to have dealt with momentarily disappearing wallets before. Houston did agree to stop payment on the check, but the bank said the computer could not possibly be programmed to stop his account before early next week. The credit-card offices had busy phones, and differing policies, and by the time Fulham hung up in exhaustion his credit lay in a tangle, a hydra with a few of the heads cut off but most still writhing. He went through the whole house again, trying to imagine his self of yesterday in every tidy room, including the small room, once a sewing room, where they watched television. To discourage excessive watching, the Fulhams had furnished it austerely; there was only the bare set, an oval rag rug, and a cushionless Windsor settee, with a plaid blanket neatly folded against one arm. The wallet’s non-existence rang out through the rooms like a pistol shot which leaves deafness in its wake; he stood stunned that an absence could be so decisive. It occurred to Fulham that the house would feel like this the day after he died.

Downstairs, the front door slammed. “Got the mail,” Diane called up. In his distraction he had forgotten to make his usual noon trip to the box at the end of the brick walk. But into his subconscious had filtered, hours ago, Rodolfo’s “Che gelida manina” from *La Bohème*, whistled off-key. The mail was dumped on the hall table, with the petals fallen from the summer’s last roses. A long sand-colored envelope from Houston lay amid the junk and bills. It held the check, dated three weeks ago. No hidden message, no mark of misdirection or extra wear on the envelope betrayed where it had been for so long a time. In this blankness he felt a kind of magnificence, the same kind that declines to answer prayer. He found himself not consoled. Payment on the check had been stopped; it was a worthless piece of paper.

Next morning, Saturday, Fulham awoke with a soreness in his stomach, a chafing hairball of vague anxiety that clarified into the conscious thought *I am a man without a wallet*. The arrival of the check had lessened his fears of criminal conspiracy but isolated the wallet’s loss upon a higher plane, where it merged with landscapes and faces that had once belonged to his life and would never be seen again, melted into the irreversible void like the sticky, oddly plausible stuff of dreams. Shame had replaced rage as his prime emotion; he had no wish to leave the house, or go to his makeshift office, or face the grandchildren, who, downstairs in the hall, were noisily arriving. His daughter’s and his wife’s voices twined in a brief music ended by the slam of the front door and the click of high heels briskly retreating down the walk. From an upstairs window he spied on the redheaded visitor, once his baby, as she ducked into her husband’s low sports car, flashing a length of bare leg.

The children spent the morning gorging on television and at lunchtime little Tod handed Fulham his wallet. He said, “Did you want this, Grandpa? It was all folded up in the blanket.”

His fat, worn wallet. His own.

“Oh, dear,” Diane said, putting her hand to her cheek in a choreographic gesture that seemed to Fulham to parody dismay. “When *Silk Stockings* ended I tidied up and must have folded your wallet in without realizing it. Remember, we put the blanket over our laps because of the draft?”

That made sense. The nights were getting cooler. Now Fulham recovered a dim memory of being annoyed, on the hard Windsor settee, by the lump in his back pocket. He must have removed it, while gazing at Cyd Charisse. As if in another scene from the movie, he saw himself, close up, hold the wallet in his hand, where it vanished like a snowflake.

“Grandpa has lots of wallets,” Tod’s shiny-haired little sister chimed in. “He doesn’t care.”

“Oh, now, that’s not quite true,” Fulham told her, squeezing the beloved bent book of leather between his two palms and feeling very grandpaternal, fragile and wise and ready to die.