# Beautiful Husbands

# John Updike

SPENCER RIDGEWAY had always liked Kirk Gunther, and even while, in the messy wake of his affair with Dulcie Gunther, he was being legally battered by him, Spencer found something to admire, something warriorlike and sterling, in the barrage of registered letters, hand-delivered summonses, and grim-voiced, telephoned ultimatums—all intended, Spencer felt, less to discomfit him than to panic Dulcie into an easy divorce settlement. Spencer had been noticing Kirk, indeed—on the train, downtown on Saturdays—long before Dulcie made any impression on him. He was taller than Spencer, with a full and fluffy head of hair gray in just the right places (temples, sideburns, a collielike frosting above the collar), whereas Spencer was going thin on top and combing the remaining strands across his pate from a parting closer and closer to the tip of one ear. Kirk had a year-round tan and one of those thin no-nonsense mouths, with two little tense buttons of muscle underneath, that Spencer envied; he had always been embarrassed by his own big, soft-looking lips. As the men and their wives happened to be, more and more, at the same cocktail parties, and on adjacent tennis courts at the club, and in the same conservation groups, the couples drew closer. Kirk laughed at Spencer’s jokes—Kirk himself could not make jokes, his tongue wasn’t hinged that way—and took him on as a golf partner, though he was a solid 8 and Spencer a courtesy 20.

Dulcie was a steady, up-the-middle 13—from the women’s tees, of course. She had oodles of honey-gold curly hair held in place by her visor, and tidy brown legs exposed to mid-thigh by her taut khaki golf skirt. The one time Doris, Spencer’s unfortunate first wife, showed up to make a Sunday-afternoon foursome, she horrified the other three by wearing blue-jean cutoffs, with the shadow of a Sixties-style heart-patch on the backside, and muddy Adidases in place of golf shoes. All of Dulcie’s costumes were impeccably Eighties-suburban. When she and Spencer first began to meet illicitly, her broad-shouldered, waistless wool suits and summer frocks of fine-striped ticking, or her scoop-necked georgette blouse with a flickering skirt of pleated crêpe de chine, gave him the thrilling impression that Kirk himself had dressed her; Spencer could picture him, sitting with his intent, humorless handsomeness in the clothing store, surrounded by multiple reflections of his fluffy, frosty hair, as Dulcie strutted out of the dressing room in one smart outfit after another. And when her furtive luncheons with Spencer blossomed into intimacy, this impression spread to her underwear—lace-trimmed bras, bikini-style panties, sexy yet not really frivolous, in military tones of beige or black—and even to her skin, which was silky-smooth with lotions that perhaps Kirk’s hands had spread, especially on that unreachable, itchy area just under the shoulder blades.

In the Gunthers’ house, after the figurative roof fell in, Spencer would stretch his tired body and ease his battered spirit amid Kirk’s heavy, leathery furniture. He admired the matching plaid walnut suite in the den lined with Books of the Month, the stereo and record cabinets expertly cut and mortised by Kirk’s sharp-toothed array of power equipment in the basement, and, upstairs, the monolithic bed that consisted simply of an airfoam mattress on a low wooden platform. Perfect-seeming Kirk had had a bad back, Dulcie revealed; another unsuspected debility was that, according to her, he had been incredibly boring.

Spencer always tried to defend him. “I always found him pleasant. Not a laugh a minute, exactly …”

“Like incredibly darling and amusing you,” she interrupted, giving him such a hug that the wooden platform creaked beneath the airfoam.

He found her adoration unexpected and, he could not but feel, undeserved. Spencer had some trouble understanding how he had come to be in this other man’s wife’s embrace, trying to pick a prong of her tumbling golden hair out of his eye. “… but hearty,” he finished. “Good-natured.”

“He was rigid and brutal,” Dulcie insisted. “This tactic with the eviction notices is so typical; he knows how terrified I am of the police.”

In truth, it was an impressive sight, to see the sheriff’s new Chevrolet Celebrity coupe, with its twirling blue light and silver lettering, pull up the driveway to deliver the latest beribboned, notarized document.

“Just getting a parking ticket used to make me cry.” This kind of small revelation, this little glimpse of her feminine softness, had had a slightly different quality when she was still Kirk’s lawful wife. Then, it had been a peek into paradise; now, it was a mere datum. “Whereas *he* scoffed at tickets and used to rip them off the windshield and throw them into the gutter. I used to pick them up when he wasn’t looking and Scotch-tape them together and pay them.”

“He did?” Spencer said. “That’s fascinating.”

“It used to make me hysterical. He liked that. That’s why he’s doing all this now, to make me hysterical. It’s his way of still interacting.” He felt her skin take on an oily, preening texture as he mechanically rubbed below her shoulder blades.

“Oh, now,” he said comfortingly. “Don’t forget, he’s hurting. We’ve badly hurt him.”

“Pooh,” she said, her face unseen beneath her heap of hair, except for a corner of her painted lips, where a bubble of saliva had popped with the exclamation. “I don’t know,” she went on woefully. “It’s horrible, being a woman. Sometimes I feel you’re both against me. Everything he does, you seem to defend.”

“I just think we should be fair, and try to understand Kirk. All this suing and so on is just his way of dealing. We have each other, and he has nothing.”

“He has his own precious pretty carcass, and that’s all he ever cared about anyway.”

“Yes, it was pretty,” Spencer had to agree.

Even when the lawsuit for alienation of affections was far advanced, Spencer imagined he could glimpse, through the swirl of correspondence and the hours of stilted conferences with dapper lawyers, a twinkle in Kirk’s eye. At one point in the actual proceedings, he found himself bumping through the padded courtroom doors at the same time as the plaintiff and made a joke (“Must have been part of a padded cell”) at which Kirk curtly, grudgingly chuckled. Away from Dulcie’s calorie-and-fiber-conscious cooking, the man had put on weight and looked, in the witness box, a bit jowly. He looked grim and unsympathetic; between responses, he clenched his teeth and did a lot of blinking. Spencer (who had lost seven pounds) felt disappointed by Kirk’s deterioration and further disappointed by the verdict, of not guilty and no damages. The judge was a woman to whom the very charge savored of a bygone sexism. In this day and age wasn’t a woman free to change men if she so desired? Was she some sort of chattel for men to bandy back and forth?

“It was sad,” Spencer confided to Dulcie, “to see him come such a cropper.”

“Why?” she asked, wide-eyed. “I thought it served him right. Now he says he’s going after custody of the children.”

There had been something lovable, Spencer had thought, in the erect dignity with which Kirk had marched away at the head of his little team of legal advisers, none of them quite so tall nor so gravely tan nor so tastefully grayed as he.

“Poor guy. I’m afraid he doesn’t have much of a chance.”

“Not if you make me an honest woman, he doesn’t.”

Married, and reduced to impecuniousness by their legal fees, Spencer and Dulcie resigned from the club and played at public courses, she giving him three strokes a side. Kirk got fatter and uglier and his legal attentions became a mere embarrassment. When he sullenly, silently came to pick up the children on alternate weekends, Spencer would spy on him from the upstairs window, or from behind the library curtains, probing his old admiration much as the tongue warily probes the socket of an extracted tooth. His heart would flutter, his face get hot. It took a long time for Kirk’s silvery magic to tarnish entirely.

He loved hearing from Dulcie details of her other marriage, especially the early years—the rainy honeymoon in Bermuda, the quarrels with his possessive upstate mother, the progressively larger and less shabby living quarters spiralling out from the heart of the city into increasingly affluent and spacious suburbs. Kirk at first was almost painfully thin, a beanpole, and totally innocent about alcohol, among other things. Then there was a period of problem drinking, and flirtations with these tarty, man-hungry junior account execs at his office. But such a dear father, at least in the beginning, when the children were little and thought he was God, before this obsession with his own career, his own condition, even his clothes. “You see, Spencer dear—don’t tickle like that—they didn’t have the word ‘yuppie’ in those days, so Kirk didn’t know exactly what he was until he was forty, and it was almost too late.”

Spencer’s own early married life had been spent in exotically different circumstances, on the other coast, in rebellion and riot, experimenting with drugs and organic farming. Doris had been a perfect hippie, hairy all over and serenely stoned. Even the divorce she had been laid-back and philosophical about. He begged Dulcie, “Tell me about the pajamas again.”

“Well, darling, there’s really nothing much to tell. I think I began to hate the marriage when he insisted I iron his pajamas. When we were first married, he was still such a boy he would sleep in the underwear he had worn that day, the way he would in college, and then for years he used these simple dacron pajamas with a drawstring, no monogram or anything, and it was plenty good enough if I simply folded them when they were fresh out of the dryer, before the wrinkles really, you know, set. But then we got into a-hundred-percent sea-island cotton that he said had to be hand-washed in lukewarm water, and he wanted sharp *creases* just to put himself between the covers in. And the eyeshades, and the ear stopples—I felt utterly shut out.”

“And the shoes,” Spencer prompted. “Did he have shoes?”

“Did he have *shoes?* They covered the entire floor of his closet, row on row, and went right up one wall. He had a separate pair for every suit, and then on the weekend, if he raked leaves it would be the suede Hush Puppies, but if I asked him to haul just one load of mulch over to the rose bed he would go back in the house and put on the shitkickers. It was like his skis, he had the pair for corn and the pair for icy conditions, and then a third kind for deep powder. And the *gloves:* if he couldn’t find one certain pair of gloves, with grease stains already on them, he wouldn’t touch the engine of the car, even just to add windshield-washer fluid.”

“And did he take a long time in the bathroom, or a short time?” Spencer asked, knowing full well the answer. Eventually he knew all the answers, had extracted every molecule of the departed husband from his wife’s memory—Kirk’s odors and deodorants, his habits both annoying and endearing, the quarrels they had and the orgasms he gave her or, increasingly during the last years, failed to.

“I love kissing you,” she confided to Spencer. “With him it was like putting your mouth against an automatic bank teller, where it swallows your credit card. And his hair! You had to be so careful not to muss his hair. That fluffiness wasn’t natural, you know. It was *set*.” There was a limit to this sort of information. Kirk slowly became boring. The wraps of her first husband fell from her, so that Dulcie at last stood naked, fit to be loved.

Spencer loved her. Warming the dawn and evening of every day, the source and goal of every commute, the light and animator of every weekend, Dulcie was his treasure, the gold from which Kirk’s dull residue had been panned away. He loved her cascading hair, her sturdy legs, her sweet, steady golf swing, which never strayed from the fairway in an ill-advised attempt to achieve more distance. They rejoined the golf club, their finances again permitting and Kirk having long ago resigned.

It was there, at the post-fourball barbecue, in the fullness of the happiness of Dulcie’s team’s having won the women’s division, that a copper-haired woman approached Spencer. “Hi there,” she said, speaking just like a name tag, “I’m Deirdre.” Her handshake was a little too firm, and her gaze a shade too level. “Ol’ Dulcie was terrific out there, though I was the one got the gross par on the dogleg eleventh, which what with my twenty handicap made a net eagle for the team.”

Dulcie had come up behind the other woman, and gave her a comradely hug. Their two curly heads were side by side, their tan faces with pale laugh crinkles at the corners of their eyes. “Isn’t she terrific?” Dulcie asked, though Spencer couldn’t see quite how. But, then, years ago, he remembered, he had been insensitive to Dulcie’s charm. “The Greenfields have just moved to town, and I’ve promised to have them over.”

Deirdre glanced around, rather urgently. “Let me find Ben.” She hurried into the crowd, which was dressed with facetious country-club gaudiness—scarlet pants, straw hats—under the hanging cloud of mesquite-flavored smoke. Spencer felt a fateful sliding in his stomach.

“I don’t want to meet any new people,” he told his wife.

“You’ll like him,” Dulcie promised.

The aggressive copper-haired woman was dragging a man toward them—a tall, dazed sacrificial lamb with a sheepish air, an elegantly narrow and elevated nose, slicked-down black hair, and a seersucker suit that gave him, with his blue button-down shirt and striped necktie, an endearingly old-fashioned, vaguely official ambience. He was, in his way, beautiful.

Spencer, his face heating up, hardly had time to protest, “I don’t want to like him.”