# The Other Woman

# John Updike

ED MARSTON awoke in the night to urinate, and as he groped his way back to bed the moonlight picked out a strange flash of white paper in his wife’s top bureau drawer, which she had not quite closed. This drawer, he knew from twenty-two years of cohabitation, Carol devoted to her underthings and a small stack of folded headscarves over on the left. Paper belonged in her desk downstairs, or on the hall table, where she usually left the day’s mail. She was breathing steadily, obliviously, like an invisible ocean in the dark, not ten feet away. With two fingers extended in a pincer, taking care not to rustle, Ed extracted the paper out from under the top scarf and crept back to the bathroom. He shut the door, turned on the light, and sat on the closed toilet seat. As he unfolded the concealed document, his hands were, more than trembling, jumping.

It was a homemade valentine to her from the husband of a couple they knew, a pleasant bland couple he had never much noticed, on the politer fringes of their acquaintanceship. Yet the valentine had been flamboyantly penned and phrased with a ceremonious ardor, its short text encircled by a large heart in red ink, a heart which, the writer reassured the receiver, was “even bigger this year than last.”

A weapon had been placed in Ed’s hands. He reread the missive more than once, and in his nervous excitement had to lift up the seat and urinate again. He switched off the bathroom light. The moonstruck snow outside the window seemed to leap bluely toward him, into him, with its smooth and expansive curves of coldness, its patches of shadow and glare. He felt toweringly tall, as if his feet rested not on the bathroom floor, which had fallen away, but on the earth itself. His trustfully sleeping wife, and her lover asleep in his house up the road, and that man’s own wife, and all their combined children were in his hands.

Still trembling, he refolded the valentine. Sliding along beside the bed toward the bureau in its slant of moonlight, he soundlessly tucked it back into the drawer, beneath the top silk scarf. Tomorrow Carol might notice its slightly exposed position, and rebuke herself, and thank God that Ed had not noticed. Not that she was much one for rebuking herself, or thanking God.

Suddenly her voice, out of the darkness of the bed, asked sharply, “What are you doing?”

“Trying to find you, sweetie. I’ve just been to the bathroom.”

She made no answer, as if she had spoken in her sleep. When he got back into the warm bed beside her, her breathing seemed as deep and oblivious as before. Gently the aroma of sleeping flesh and its soft snuffles and rasps washed over his senses. Her life was like a spring in some dark forest, constantly, murmuringly overflowing. Far away in the neighborhood, a dog barked, excited by the moonlight on the snow.

It fit, he realized: Carol’s volatile moods of late, her spells of lovingness and depression, her increased drinking, her unexplained lateness in returning from certain trips into New York and from evening meetings in their suburb—meetings of a zoning commission, come to think of it, of which the other man, Jason Reynolds, was the chairman. It had been he, in fact, who had proposed Carol for membership; he had come to the house one night, after a portentous phone call, and, while Ed obligingly did the dinner dishes and put the youngest child to bed, murmured downstairs to her, at the dining-room table, of the crisis facing their suburb, of predatory builders and their corrupt brothers-in-law on the planning board, of the need for a woman on the commission who was here during the weekdays and could bring a homemaker’s point of view, and so on. Carol had told Ed all this afterwards, wondering whether she should accept. It would take her out of the home, she worried; Ed told her she had put in enough time in the home. She didn’t know anything about planning or building; he told her, speaking as an engineer, that there wasn’t much to know.

Now he wondered if even then, over two years ago, the affair had begun and she was only pretending to vacillate, to hang back. If so, it had been a pretty piece of acting. Ed smiled appreciatively in the dark. He had urged her to accept because she had seemed to him in danger of becoming one of those suburban agoraphobes who wind up not daring leave the house even to shop, who have everything delivered while they sit sipping sherry behind the drawn curtains. Twenty-two years and five children had pretty well absorbed the venturesome subway-rider and semi-Bohemian, in sneakers and babushka, of their city days. She could hardly be persuaded, these last years, to come into town and join him for dinner and a play. Her nervousness about flying, as the children attained college age and began to fly here and there, increased to a phobia, and she no longer felt up to the trips she and Ed used to take to the Caribbean in the winter. “Anyway,” she would argue, “they say now the sun is terrible for your skin.” Carol was blue-eyed, with wiggly oak-pale hair.

“It’s always been terrible; your skin wasn’t meant to last forever. You can sit inside and read. You can use a number-fifteen sun block.”

“Well, that seems to defeat the whole purpose of going. Why not just stay home and save the airfare?”

“You know something, my dear? You’re becoming a real drag.” Ed had urged her to accept the commission appointment because he wanted her out of the house. He wanted her, if the truth be known, out of his life.

But she had done him no harm—had done, indeed, everything he had asked. Borne him healthy children, created a home that could be displayed to colleagues and friends, served as an extension of his ego. Yet, lying beside her night after night, rising to urinate once, twice, depending on his insomnia, which expanded in spirals like a rage, he had become convinced that there must be a better life than this. A better life for the both of them. Carol had her qualities still—a flexible grace, though she had put on weight with the years, and a good-humored intuitiveness that was like the pure blue pilot light burning in an old-fashioned oven—but Ed had never dared expect that some other man might covet her. Jason Reynolds’s message, in its festive red outline, had struck a tone handsomely blended of friendliness and passion, a tone of manly adoration. Carol, somehow, was loved. Realizing this made Ed, too, feel loved, and like a child in arms he fell swiftly asleep.

For days and weeks Ed did nothing with his knowledge, merely observed. How could he not have seen before? At parties, the lovers would do a long circling dance of avoidance, elaborately courteous and jolly with almost everyone else there, and only after dinner, when the shoes come off and the records go on, and the tired host brings fresh logs up from the cellar, did Carol and Jason allow themselves to drift together, and to talk quietly in that solemn way of people to whom the most trivial daily details of one another’s lives have acquired the gravity of the sexual, and then to dance together with a practiced tenderness that they trusted those around them to be too drunk or sleepy to observe.

Jason was a thin and dignified man, a trust officer at a mid-town bank, who observed a rigorous health regimen of exercise and diet; he had a rowing machine, played squash at lunchtime in the city, and after dinner jogged along the country roads in a reflective orange vest. It sometimes happens with such people that their bodies make their faces pay the price of aging, and so it was with him: his middle-aged face needed flesh. His fatless, taut, weather-yellowed features, his deep eye sockets and long creased cheeks and dry gray hair were those of a man ending rather than beginning his forties. Jason was forty-two, like Carol. In his arms she looked young, and her broad hips suggested a relaxed and rounded fertility rather than middle-aged spread. Though Jason’s eyelids were lowered in their deep sockets, and seemed to shudder in the firelight, Carol’s blue eyes were alertly round and her face as pristine and blank as a china statuette’s each time the slow music turned her around so Ed could see her. It was not their faces that gave it away, it was their hands, their joined hands melting bonelessly together and Jason’s other hand pressing an inch or two too low on the small of Carol’s back.

Ed was not watching alone, he noticed; the flickering, dim room, cushions and chairs and fuzzy heads and stockinged legs, was lined with shadows watching Jason and Carol, or studiously not watching. People knew—had known, with the casual accuracy of detached observation, long before he had, before the night of the valentine. Until then he had existed in a kind of bubble, a courteous gap in the communal wisdom. He had been blundering with a blind smile through society while the truth, giggling, just evaded his fingertips. This, in retrospect, was hard to forgive. Did his opposite number, Patricia Reynolds, also exist in such a bubble? What did she know, or guess, or feel?

She was a short woman, with exemplary posture, who seemed wooden to Ed. Even her prettiest feature, her thick chestnut hair, seemed a shade of wood, brushed shiny and cut short in a helmet shape, with bangs. She jogged and exercised alongside Jason, but the regimen that had ravaged his face gave hers instead a bland athletic smoothness. Her chin was square, her brown eyes opaque. From a wealthy but not famous family, she had attended correct second-best schools and was thoroughly the product of her background; with a mannish upper-class accent, throatier than one expected, Pat had a good-soldier air about her, as if she had stiffened in her mission of carrying her family line into the next generation. There were two Reynolds children—a son and a daughter. Pat was slightly younger than Jason, as Carol was younger than Ed. Ed had never heard Pat say anything unpleasant or unconventional; but, then, he had rarely listened to her. At parties they tended to avoid each other. He had the feeling that he, with his rumpled, sleepless air, his incorrigible cigarettes and bossy, clownish, perhaps coarse manner, rather dismayed her; when he approached, she grew extra polite. Now, though, his eyes sought out her chiselled profile in the room, to see if she, like him, was watching.

In fact, she was seated on the floor not far away and, her face turned full away from the dancers, was discussing with another woman that most appropriate of topics for the commission chairman’s wife, zoning—the tragic break-up of the local estates, the scandalous predations of the developers. Ed moved from his easy chair to the floor near her and said, “But, baby—you don’t mind my calling you ‘baby,’ do you, Pat?—nobody wants to *live* in the old estates. The third generation is all in SoHo doing graffiti art. They can’t afford the upkeep and the taxes and nobody can afford servants and they want to get their money *out* and in *hand*.”

“Well, of course that’s what everybody says,” Pat said, “and I suppose there’s some truth to it.”

“*Some* truth! It’s all truth, Pat honey.” Six bourbons were talking through him, not quite in synchrony. “You blame these poor hard-working Italian contractors who do the bulldozing and put up their four-hundred-thousand-dollar tract houses, but it’s the rich, the *rich* who are greedy, who are dying to sell and let somebody else put the new slate roof on Daddy’s old stables. Condominiumization”—he was so proud at having got the word out intact that even Pat smiled, briefly showing her dental perfection—“is the only way to save these old places from the wrecker’s ball.”

The woman next to Pat, Georgene Fuller, tried to come to the rescue. She was lanky and lazy and whiny, with long bleached hair loose to her shoulders. Ed had slept with her, for six months, years ago. “Still, Ed, you have to admit—”

“I have to admit nothing,” he said quickly. “How about you, Pat? What do you have to admit?”

A flicker of puzzlement crossed this other woman’s even features. Georgene nudged Ed in the small of his back. But she needn’t have feared; it suited him to have Pat in the dark, in her bubble.

“The wrecker’s ball,” he resumed. “It should be the name of a song. We’re gonna dance off both our shoes,” he began to sing. The pressure on his back repeated, and it occurred to him he should ask Georgene to dance. Once you sleep with them, however many years go by, they fit smoothly into your arms.

But others also wished to break up the conversation between Pat and Ed; Jason and Carol suddenly loomed over them like parents above children playing on the floor. “We think you two should dance with us,” Carol announced primly, and obliging Ed pushed himself up from the floor, which seemed with the bourbon to have taken on an elastic life of its own, and to bounce under his feet. Carol, rather miraculously, always felt slightly strange in his arms, as though their many years of marriage had never been. They had never quite worked out the steps, and this awkwardness made her interesting, especially now that he knew that somewhere, with somebody else, she *was* working out the steps. Her plump body felt solid with her secret, and unusually flexible to him; reaching behind her gracefully, she adjusted the position of his hand on her back. Ed had experimentally placed it an inch or two lower than usual. “Jason looks like a smooth dancer,” he said.

“Not that I noticed,” she answered.

“He is with Pat. Look at them go. Twirls, and everything.”

“They went to the same sort of cotillions.”

“But there’s more to life than cotillions, huh?”

“Ed, you really shouldn’t drink so much. It’s what gives you insomnia—all that sugar in the blood.”

“Next you’ll be telling me I should take up jogging.”

“Or something. It’s not just you. We’re *both* horribly out of shape.”

He moved his hand lower again on her back and patted her solid fanny. He had his husband’s prerogatives still. “To me you feel just right,” he said.

Ed was an engineer, specializing in stress analysis of tall steel-frame buildings. His plan for dismantling his marriage demanded that his wife’s affair remain in place, as a temporary support; otherwise, at the moment of pullout, his burden of guilt and strangeness would be too much. The children were heaviest, but the house, the town, and all the old connubial habits would weigh upon him in his moment of flight. He feared that Jason and Carol might break up out of their own dynamics, or in response to discovery from the other side; yet he wanted to allow some months to steel himself, as it were. Seeing, in the raw spring evenings, tall Jason moving with his jogger’s stagger along the shadowy roads, Ed felt a pang of alarm that the precious man would be hit by a car, and the whole structure collapse.

Warm weather arrived, with its quickening of the blood, and then summer, with its promiscuous looseness, its airy weave of coming and going, of lingering light and warm darkness, of screened porches and reactivated swimming pools and pickup drinks on the patio. Everyone got browner in the summer, more frolicsome and louder; the suburban women in their bathing suits and sundresses took on the sultry hardness of high-class whores—their eyes hidden behind sunglasses, their toenails lacquered. Jason and Carol became more blatant; more than once, Ed spotted them holding hands in a corner of a cocktail party, and when asked where she had been during some unaccountable absence, she would give a teen-ager’s lame, evasive answer—“Oh, out.” She might add, “It’s so hot I had to take a walk toward the river,” or else display a half-gallon carton of skimmed milk and a packet of wheat-germ cookies as if the purchase of these had naturally consumed two hours. And Jason was always coming around to the house on more or less plausible errands, having to do with zoning or tennis or an exchange of gardening equipment. Ed, to make his tennis-court fence ten years ago, had invested forty dollars in one of those two-handled post-hole diggers, and it was surprising how many posts Jason seemed to be planting in his modest back yard, or how often, for a man who owned only a half-acre, he had to borrow Ed’s chainsaw. Every errand, of course, won from Carol a hospitable offer of coffee or tea or a drink, depending on the time of day.

Pat sometimes came along on these hollow excursions, and made flawless, wooden small talk with Ed out on the screened porch while the other two were coincidentally absent within the house: Carol had had to rush into the kitchen, Jason to the bathroom or to make a phone call. The house, that summer, seemed much used. Carol kept setting up, around the excuses of the tennis court and the swimming pool, informal little parties that almost always included the Reynoldses. One day in early August, returning to the house from an emergency run to the liquor store downtown, Ed swung into the driveway as Carol and Jason were greeting another couple. They looked so natural, posed side by side in the golden late-afternoon light, so *presiding*, standing together one flagstone step up from the driveway, he with his gray hair and gaunt stoop and she with her matronly round arms and shoulders, that Ed felt abolished, already gone; he secretly shared their joy in each other, and yet primitive indignation contributed to his energy as he marched toward them with the rattling bags of liquor. Carol looked toward him; she seemed un-feignedly happy to see him. Or was it the liquor she was happy to see? She was wearing only a wraparound denim skirt over her black bathing suit, and in the chill of approaching evening was hugging herself; the homeyness of this ageless gesture, and the familiar small sight, as she stepped down and reached forward to take one of the bags from him, of the downy hairs standing erect with goosebumps on her bare forearms, wounded him unexpectedly—activated random stress within a situation he had considered thoroughly analyzed.

The season was ebbing. Ed had to make his move. The children were conveniently scattered to summer jobs and to friends’ houses, but for the youngest, who after dinner wrapped himself in the mumble of television in his room upstairs. Ed invited Carol to take a walk with him. Her eyes widened, into their china-doll look, and she hurried to get a jacket from the closet; the tone of his voice, without his willing it, had spoken to her guilt. They walked along the broad grassy path, favored by joggers and snowmobilers, kept open above the Croton Aqueduct, which poured water south in a line parallel to the river and the railroad tracks. The city’s gravity pulled everything toward it. The Marstons walked uphill, between clumps and groves of maples and beeches, and past school grounds seen through wire fencing; back yards abutted on the right-of-way, and Ed and Carol felt themselves moving like ghosts through family cookouts and badminton games and the domestic music of chugging dishwashers and the evening news.

He described to her the night he had discovered the valentine, and what he had observed since. She listened and did not interrupt; in the corner of his vision, against the moving background of leaves and fence slats, her pale face seemed a motionless image projected from a slide upon a skidding, flickering screen. He proposed this to her: he would leave, take an apartment in the city, and take her secret with him. In return for his silence, she would present the separation to their children and friends as a mutual decision. He would provide financial support, and in a year they would see how things stood.

She spoke at last. “I’ll give him up.”

“Oh, don’t do that.”

“Why not?” Her eyes had grown watery, seeking his.

“You love him.”

“Maybe I love you, too.”

“You think that now, but in the long run …” The sentence trailed off. He summoned up a little indignation. “Anyway, I don’t want to be loved *too*. Come on, Carol,” he said. “We’ve given it a good try, had some nice kids and nice times; you wouldn’t have taken up with Jason if things were what they should be. You and he, you really seem to have it.”

She could have denied it. But she simply said, “He has Pat.”

Ed sighed. “Yes, well. I can’t take care of everybody.”

This was a Saturday. The next day, with the sickening new condition of their marriage drying everywhere like an invisible paste, and the children and the pets and the furniture all still unknowing, Carol surprised Ed by still wanting to be taken to a Sunday-afternoon concert at a local church. The Reynoldses were also there, in a pew on the far side of the nave; they all mingled over punch afterwards, in the ladies’ parlor. It was thrilling, for a connoisseur of stress, to see Carol lightly bantering with Jason and making valiant small talk with Pat. As Ed drove her home, she began to cry, and he asked her why she had wanted to come. “It was my only chance to see Jason,” she confessed, as bluntly as if to a counsellor, and not bothering to hide the reverent way her voice fell in pronouncing her lover’s name. So quickly, Ed had become her accomplice. He felt his heart shiver and harden. “He knows I know?”

“Not the details, just the fact.”

“How did you manage that?”

“I slipped a note to him. Didn’t you see?”

Ed felt trapped and betrayed. With the other man knowing, there was less chance of backing out. “No.”

“I thought you’d become such a great observer.”

He asked her, sarcastic in turn, “Aren’t you two afraid of Pat catching you out in some of these shenanigans?”

“She doesn’t want to catch us out,” Carol told him. He glanced over, and her eyes, though red-rimmed, had a twinkle. She seemed to be adjusting to his departure faster than he was.

That fall, Ed entered into the strange new status of half-husband. He found a small apartment in the West Eighties and went home weekends to rake and put up storm windows and entertain the kids. Some nights, he slept over in the guest room, where the children didn’t like to find him. They wanted him back in Mommy’s bed. That creepy Mr. Reynolds was always coming around, red-faced and panting, in his jogging shoes. They called him Big Foot. “Big Foot’s just clumped up!” one of the children would shout from downstairs, and Ed, involved in a game of Trivial Pursuit in his oldest daughter’s room, would see Carol sail past the door, her quick step silent, her whole body lightened by expectation.

In this cozy atmosphere, with their conspiracy now widened to include the children, Ed asked Carol, in curiosity as much as envy, what Jason did for her that he had not. “It’s very peculiar,” she admitted, spacing her words. “He just thinks I’m amazingly wonderful.” And she had the grace, this valuation being so clearly excessive, to look down into her drink and blush.

“Well, who doesn’t?” he asked, himself blushing. Since leaving her, Ed was all flattery.

She looked up sharply. Did he imagine it, or had her blue eyes become darker, snappier in her months of living alone, of being her own woman? Certainly her hair, its oak color loaded with gray, had become wigglier. “*You* didn’t,” she told him. “You never did. I was just *there* for you, like an I-beam or something. Any other beam would have done just as well. I’m sure you’ve laid some in place already.”

“No,” he said slowly, almost truthfully. For in fact Ed was enjoying the shabby austerity, the modest purity, of bachelor life. He had married so young he had never had to cook for himself before, or make his own bed. These skills had seemed arcane to him, and now they proved learnable, and he understood why women were healthier, with all that reaching and stirring and industrious attention to the texture of things. His crowded, clamorous, only slightly dangerous block near upper Broadway spoke to him more intimately, of small decisions and services, groceries and laundry, than the suburbs ever had. Keeping himself fed and tidy and half-running Carol’s household forty minutes to the north took most of his energy. Living alone makes one methodical; his drinking had eased off, and the weekend slices of his old social life tasted sour and flat.

He had rarely seen their friends except on weekends anyway, and in these days of domestic confusion his defection and part-time reappearance were casually accepted. The Reynoldses, of the couples they had known together, were kindest and most attentive to Carol in her singleness, and came by the house oftenest. Pat and she shared garden-club trips, aerobics classes, a night course in the English Romantic poets at the local community college. The Marston children gave Pat the logical nickname of Little Foot, as if by verbal magic to knit the Reynoldses closer together. “The Feet are here again,” one would shout, and Ed, if he was caught in the house, would sometimes have to make a fourth at tennis.

He always insisted that he and Pat be partners. That way, the sides were most even. Jason was a well-schooled but lumbering player, and Carol’s insouciance, her good-humored indifference to the exact outcome, undermined her natural grace at the game. Ed had a weak backhand but killer instinct at the net, and little Pat played, it seemed to him, like a weakly wound-up machine. She moved back and forth as if on tiptoe and her movements minced in the sides of his vision. Across the net from her, Ed would have gobbled up her ladylike forehands and pounded them back at her. As it was, he would growl, “Let’s go get ’em, Pat,” and count on her to cover the back line as he lunged from side to side, looking for the winning volley. The matches were fun, especially when fussy, no-fat-on-me Jason began to tut and mutter to himself, and Carol grew rosy in the face as she tried to play to please her lover while both acknowledging Ed’s ironic glances and keeping her expression blank for Pat’s benefit.

In a way, it was the three of them against Pat. Or was it the three of them keeping her safe in her bubble of ignorance? Ed felt alternately that they were a deceit machine, chewing her up, and a kind of cradle, holding her above the abyss. For what, really, he asked himself, would telling her the truth have done but force her to act and perhaps plunge them all into disaster? How much did Pat suspect? Nothing, it appeared, which seemed incredible to Ed; just looking at Jason and Carol across the net, hearing their mutual encouragements, feeling the easy warmth their partnership gave off should have told Pat the tale. Once he joked to her, “You know what they look like, those two? Mr. and Mrs. Jack Sprat.” It was true: in the stress of their long affair, Jason had become even thinner and Carol plumper. Pat laughed politely but emptily, intent on her serve. Though her strokes lacked fire, she did like to win; this much was human about her, and intelligible, and likable.

She was the youngest, their baby, not quite forty; and Ed, at forty-five, felt like the daddy, only playing at playing. His sense of their spatial relations, out on the court, was of himself enclosing the three others and of keeping them, with transparent lines of force, apart, as if under his direction had been struck one of those balances of gravity and inertia, rigidity and mass that form islands of stability within the universe. Pat’s ignorance, he decided, was a function of her social complacence, and thus more annoying than pitiable. She had snobbishly willed herself to be sexually blind.

Only once, that long sunny fall they shared, was he physically stirred by her; after three sets she complained of a blister, and on the bench by the side of the court took off her sneaker and sock. Little Foot. The neatness that through the rest of her body seemed rather wooden and mechanical here in her bare, pale foot was exquisite; here in the long low late-afternoon rays that slanted upon them, imprinting their sweaty bodies and tennis outfits with the fencing’s shadowy lozenges, Pat’s sharp, small anklebones and metatarsal tendons and unpainted toenails roused in Ed a desire to kneel in slobbering self-abasement and to kiss this tidy white piece of woman, to whose golden sole adhered a few cinnamon-red grains of clay-court topping.

Pat felt his eyes feasting on her foot and looked up as if he were a shoe salesman who had failed to answer a perfectly reasonable question. The moment passed.

“Doesn’t she think it strange,” Ed asked Carol, “always getting stuck with us, always being dragged here?”

“She likes me,” Carol said, with her endearing insouciance. “She feels sorry for me.”

“Does she ever ask why I left?”

“No. Not really. We don’t discuss that sort of thing. I think she just sees you as a rather wild, unpredictable person and there’s no accounting for what people like you do.”

“As opposed to people like Jason.”

“Mm-hm.” Just thinking of Jason made Carol’s lips draw in as though she were sucking a candy.

“What’s she going to do when she finds out?”

“I don’t know. Ask me to give him up, and I guess I’ll have to.”

“Have you ever thought of giving him up right now, before there’s an ugly crisis?”

Carol sipped at her drink and reminded him, “I offered to, and you said no.”

“That was in relation to us. I’m thinking of it now for your sake. Don’t you ever feel terribly guilty toward her?”

“All the time,” Carol confessed—rather cheerfully, Ed thought.

“Aren’t you ever afraid I’m going to tell her?”

“No. That’s the last thing you’d ever do.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a coward,” she promptly, lightly said, and softened it to “The same reason nobody tells her—even her own children. They discuss it with mine. Ours. We’re all cowards. Anyway, what would be in it for you? You got your exit visa, you don’t care what happens to us back in the old country.”

“Oh, but I do. I do. Apparently I wasn’t a very satisfactory husband for you. I’m trying to arrange one for you that is.”

“That’s very kind of you, dear,” Carol said. Ed couldn’t tell if she was being ironic. His deceptions included this ambiguity toward Carol: was he aiming truly to be rid of her or in some circuitous way to win her back—to show her who, underneath all, was boss?

He always boarded the train south, back to his apartment and his block, with some relief to be out of the suburban cat’s-cradle he had helped weave. But his life, his life as his reptile brain grasped it, was still back there, witnessing Carol’s wifely blushes on the other side of the net and the other woman’s exposed bare foot, like the helpless cold foot of a cadaver, in the warm sunset light. Sunday nights, in bed, he could not stop replaying the tennis match, its diagonals and elastic, changing distances. Round watching faces, children’s faces in the grandstands—though in fact the children rarely came to watch; they snubbed it all—became frustratingly confused with the fuzzy balls being battered back and forth. Eventually he would fall asleep, with no boundary between insomnia and dream and no healing sense, when he awoke, of having slept soundly. Being alone in bed made even a small room seem large, and reverberant, like a great drum with the ceiling for a skin.

At last, mercifully, the weather became too cold for tennis. He did not want to face Pat anymore, however securely this woman was sealed in her bubble of unknowing. The lovers had come to accept their precarious situation as settled, and Ed’s complicity as their right. His role as confidant subtly expanded to that of pander. Carol took to asking, in that casual, irresistible way of hers, if they could borrow his apartment during the day, when he was off at work. Returning through the winter dark, he would find his bed made with an alien neatness, and sometimes a bottle of wine in the refrigerator, or his Martini pitcher used as a vase for a bright bouquet of flowers, the kind of bouquet peddled, in a paper cone, at subway entrances or from gloomy traffic islands.

The city was slowly absorbing Ed. He had made a few friends, if not commitments, and asked that on weekends Carol send the children, those young enough still to be interested, in on the train. The echoing halls of the Museum of Natural History welcomed him back from his own childhood; many of the exhibits were jazzier, and pedagogic voices talked from the walls, but the extinct creatures had not aged, and the African dioramas still had the same airless, suspenseful enchantment of Christmas windows along Fifth Avenue. A dry tuft of foreground grass or a few presumably geologically accurate pebbles scattered to lend verisimilitude would fascinate him, as if these humble details, just inches inside the great glass pane, had a secret vitality denied the stiff stuffed creatures at the center of the exhibit. When, late that winter, Pat’s bubble at last broke, Ed felt well removed from the crisis, which was muffled by a snowstorm in any case. Carol kept phoning him, and several times a cloud of static overwhelmed her voice, and the connection was broken.

Apparently a maiden aunt of Pat’s, who lived in the next town to the south, in one of those big Hudson River houses that had not yet been condominiumized, had seen Jason and Carol in a car together, at eight-thirty on a weekday morning. Ed knew it was their habit for Jason to miss the train that Pat had dropped him off to catch, walk a block or two to where Carol would pick him up, and then take the next train from the station farther down the line; in this way they stole a half-hour for themselves. A dangerous habit, and hardly worth it, Ed had advised Carol long ago. But the little wifely act of putting Jason on a train had been precious to her. The aunt, seeing them with dim eyes from her own moving car, had thought Carol must be Pat, but heavier than she had ever seen her, with bushier hair, and the car didn’t seem exactly familiar, either; yet there was no mistaking Jason—that long head, thin as a knife. Troubled by the possibility that she was going senile and seeing things, the innocent old lady telephoned to have her vision confirmed.

“Evidently,” Carol told Ed, “Pat very coolly lied and said yes, she had been taking Jason to a different station because they had dropped off their other car at a gas station near the town line.”

“What she could have said that would have been better,” Ed pointed out, “was that Jason had accepted a ride that particular morning with a woman they both know who also commutes. It happens all the time. I assume you were driving the Honda.”

“It needs its snow tires, by the way. I totally forgot to have them put on. I’ve been nearly getting killed.”

“Then what happened?”

“Well, I guess she stewed all day, but still hoped Jason would have some explanation when he came back. But this image, of a fat woman with messy hair, she instantly connected with me. How do you like that for an insult?”

Ed saw Carol’s expression as she said this, her self-mocking face, eyes rounded, corners of her lips drawn down. It occurred to him that Pat had been snobbishly unable to believe that he and Carol, messy and clownish as they were, could ever do anything that would matter, seriously, to herself and her husband. “Well, he’s here. I mean, he was here. He’s had to go back because she isn’t *there*, it turns out.” In a flurry of static, an annoyed operator came on and told them that this line was being preëmpted for an emergency call. In the imposed silence, snow continued to pile up in parallel ridges on the fire escape. The lights of upper Broadway were burning a yellow-pink patch into the streaming sky. An occasional siren could be heard, trying to clear a path for itself, but the city was inexorably filling up with a smothering, peaceable snow. Ed paced back and forth; his hands, as he mixed himself a drink, were jumping. His old calculations were being upheld, miles and miles away.

Carol got through in an hour and continued her story. “Well, she’s apparently left the house. Leaving the two children there. In the middle of this blizzard. It’s crazy. Jason is very upset, but I think it’s just her rigid way of doing things. She has no sense,” she said, in the pedagogic voice of the experienced woman, “of riding with the punches.”

“Was her reaction anger, or despair, or what?”

Carol paused before selecting, “Indignation. She was indignant, first off, that her aunt had been sullied somehow; she thinks that idiotic family of hers is something sacred. Then I guess she was indignant that Jason couldn’t come up with a cover story that would get us all off the hook; he says he’d just come off the train after a rotten day at the bank and was too tired to think. So instead he kind of collapsed and told her everything. What really got to her, what she couldn’t get over, was how everybody except her had known or guessed about us for years. She kept reliving everything, all these little moments that came back. She had even seen us holding hands a couple of times, it turns out, but couldn’t believe her eyes.”

“Was she especially sore at me? It must have come out that I knew, too.”

Carol paused again; Ed felt she was being tactful. “Not especially. I don’t think they discussed you much. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but you’re really a very minor figure in all this. It was more the notion of the community at large, of looking like a fool in front of everybody for so long.”

“In her pretty bubble,” Ed said. Carol had been right: he was a coward. For a year he had been dreading the phone call from Pat asking for a conference, asking him what he knew. The call had never come; in her doughty innocence she had never asked, and he had been almost grovellingly grateful to her for that. Perhaps she too had done some stress analysis. Now, evidently, she had stormed out of the house, in the thick of a blizzard. She had cracked. Ed circled the room in his triumph, in his agitation. All night, as the plows on the street kept scraping holes in his sleep, he imagined that Pat, who was missing, would rap on his door. The secret he had so long kept was off his hands, and out whirling in the world. The voice of the wind was her voice, so coolly and multiply wronged. He would comfort her, she would take off her soaked boots and be barefoot, exposing again that little foot so tidily formed and yet somehow in essence immature, a child’s foot, ignorant, luminous.… He awoke, and it was morning, and a stark brilliance like that of an offended angel stood at the window. The sky was blank blue, and a hush as of guilt lay everywhere. With scraping shovels and whining tires, the city began to put itself back together.

Pat, it turned out, had done the conventional thing: she had fled to her mother’s, on Long Island. “She drove right across greater New York,” Carol explained to Ed, “along all these choked highways, through this blinding storm.”

“What an epic,” he said, relieved that Pat was still alive.

“I’ve been talking to Jason about it,” Carol said, as loosely chatty as if to a psychotherapist, “and as I told him, I think it was typical. Everything with her has to be black or white; she has no feeling for gray areas.”

Pat never returned to the husband or the town that had deceived her. The teen-aged children elected to stay with their schools and friends, which meant that they stayed with their father, which meant that Carol coped. The two households were gradually merged into one. Mothering the wounded and hostile Reynolds children suited Carol’s talents better than the zoning commission. In the summer, Jason moved in with her—he had always coveted, Ed thought, their bigger yard, and tennis court, and the stand of woods out back, and the screen of tall arborvitae in front, between the house and the road. The Marston children coined a nickname for their mother: they called her Happy Foot. Pat at her distance disdained the new realities as she had disdained the old; though initially she had all society’s sympathy and legal bias on her side, her rigid, vindictive behavior, especially toward her own children (they, too, had known, she maintained, and had kept her in the dark), eroded her advantages, and by the fall Jason’s lawyer saw no insurmountable obstacle to achieving divorce and custody, though Pat had vowed to give him neither.

Ed was kept abreast of all this not only through Carol, whose calls gradually became less frequent and less confiding, but through the children and their visits, and through Georgene Fuller, his lanky friend of old, who also paid visits. His interest in the episode lessened, as toward any completed job. His former wife was happy, his children were virtually adult, and the new Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds (who honeymooned in St. Thomas) sent him, when February rolled round once again, a homemade valentine.

On a bright day one April—the squinting, wincing kind when winter’s grit is swirled from the city streets and green garbage bags torn by dogs go loping down the sidewalks—Ed saw Pat Reynolds a half-block away. It was an unlikely neighborhood, the West Thirties, to bump into anyone you knew. He was hurrying to a dreaded appointment with his periodontist; he had fallen into the hands of a team of young specialists who were going to give him, in their cheery words, “a new mouth.” Root canals, refashioned crowns and bridges—but the worst of all was the gum work, with tiny quick knives and sickles and scrapers, by a humming young man who wore a thick gold chain around his neck.

Pat, when Ed thought of her, was another kind of soreness, an ache as if a rib had been long ago removed or as if, that first glaring morning after the snowstorm, the side of him toward the window had been exposed to radiation. In all the world she was the person he least wanted to see. He considered ducking into a jeweller’s entryway, or hiding in a store that offered souvenirs to the tourists straggling back from the Empire State Building; but his appointment wouldn’t wait, and Pat’s face was momentarily turned the other way. She wore a bright red scarf on her head and carried a shopping bag, which, with her sneakers and black raincoat, gave her a forlorn, wandering air. He had the irrational impression that she was in this neighborhood for some sort of medical attention also; she was hesitating right in front of the very entryway, a large mustard-colored arch, that he must pass through to have his gums cut. He had almost slipped by, squinting against the gritty wind, when she turned her head and recognized him.

“Ed! Ed Marston.” Her voice had changed; the suburban little-man throatiness had become warmer, as if she, too, lived in the city now and was learning to deal in its heated, semi-European style. “Come here,” she commanded, seeing his tendency to keep moving through the arch.

He went to her and she lifted herself on tiptoe to kiss him. The chiselled edges of her face had been blurred; her features had undergone that subtle bloating one sees on the faces of addicts, even when cured. Underneath the scarf her hair was the same rich chestnut, no longer a sleek helmet but unbecomingly permed into curliness. He tried to kiss her cheek but she aimed for the center of his mouth; having pressed her lips hard to one corner of his, she hung on, resting her face on his shoulder a long moment. His brain felt numbed. He asked, “How’ve you been?”

*“Good.”* The word was italicized; it must have been a lie, but it was offered with a fervor that would have made it true. She watched his face, waiting for another question, but since none came, asked him, “And you?”

“Terrible,” he told her, which was also something of a lie. “I’m going right now to see my periodontist—they do these terrible things to your poor gums.” Clowning in his embarrassment, he grimaced so that his gums showed.

Pat’s eyes were solemn, shining. She nodded. Her own gums, of course, would still be perfect. With great relief Ed realized that no accusations or interrogation would be forthcoming; the bubble to that extent was still intact. A bit more small talk, a mock-desperate pointing at his wristwatch, and he had made his grateful escape. He never had had much to say to Pat. A backward glance as he pushed the elevator button showed the red of her uncharacteristic scarf (she had always gone bareheaded, even in the worst of winter, jogging along beside Jason) being sliced and battered on the far side of the revolving door.

Her kiss, so unexpectedly passionate, felt like a visible encumbrance on his mouth. What had it meant? That she had crazily forgotten who he was, and how he had betrayed her? Or that she forgave him? Or that she saw him now as just a piece of the past and had hung on to him a moment as we all wish to hang on to what is gone? Or that—and this fit best, as Ed heard his name called and stood to go in to his punishment—she was in her embrace acknowledging their closeness that night when, in an exultant, trembling moment, he had held her, too, in his hands?

*to* JOHN, JASON, *and* TED

*trusting and trustworthy*