# The Indian

# John Updike

THE TOWN, in New England, of Tarbox, restrained from embracing the sea by a margin of tawny salt marshes, locates its downtown four miles inland up the Musquenomenee River, which ceases to be tidal at the waterfall of the old hosiery mill, now given over to the manufacture of plastic toys. It was to the mouth of this river, in May of 1634, that the small party of seventeen men, led by the younger son of the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony—Jeremiah Tarbox being only his second in command—came in three rough skiffs with the purpose of establishing amid such an unpossessed abundance of salt hay a pastoral plantation. This, with God’s forbearance, they did. They furled their sails and slowly rowed, each boat being equipped with four oarlocks, in search of firm land, through marshes that must appear, now that their grass is no longer harvested by men driving horses shod in great wooden discs, much the same today as they did then—though undoubtedly the natural abundance of ducks, cranes, otter, and deer has been somewhat diminished. Tarbox himself, in his invaluable diary, notes that the squealing of the livestock in the third skiff attracted a great cloud of “protestating sea-fowl.” The first houses (not one of which still stands, the oldest in town dating, in at least its central timbers and fireplace, from 1642) were strung along the base of the rise of firm land called Near Hill, which, with its companion Far Hill, a mile away, in effect bounds the densely populated section of the present township. In winter the population of Tarbox numbers something less than seven thousand; in summer the figure may be closer to nine thousand.

The width of the river mouth and its sheltered advantage within Tarbox Bay seemed to promise the makings of a port to rival Boston; but in spite of repeated dredging operations the river has proved incorrigibly silty, and its shallow winding channels, rendered especially fickle where the fresh water of the river most powerfully clashes with the restless saline influx of the tide, frustrate all but pleasure craft. These Chris Craft and Kit-Kats, skimming seaward through the exhilarating avenues of wild hay, in the early morning may pass, as the fluttering rust-colored horizon abruptly yields to the steely-blue monotone of the open water, a few clammers in hip boots patiently harrowing the tidewater floor. The intent posture of their silhouettes distinguishes them from the few bathers who have drifted down from the dying campfires by whose side they have dozed and sung and drunk away a night on the beach—one of the finest and least spoiled, it should be said, on the North Atlantic coast. Picturesque as Millet’s gleaners, their torsos doubled like playing cards in the rosy mirror of the dawn-stilled sea, these sparse representatives of the clamming industry, founded in the eighteen-eighties by an immigration of Greeks and continually harassed by the industrial pollution upriver, exploit the sole vein of profit left in the name of old Musquenomenee. This shadowy chief broke the bread of peace with the son of the governor, and within a year both were dead. The body of the one was returned to Boston to lie in the King’s Chapel graveyard; the body of the other is supposedly buried, presumably upright, somewhere in the woods on the side of Far Hill where even now no houses have intruded, though the tract is rumored to have been sold to a developer. Until the post-war arrival of Boston commuters, still much of a minority, Tarbox lived (discounting the summer people, who came and went in the marshes each year like the wild ducks and red-winged blackbirds) as a town apart. A kind of curse has kept its peace. The handmade-lace industry, which reached its peak just before the American Revolution, was destroyed by the industrial revolution; the textile mills, never numerous, were finally emptied by the industrialization of the South. They have been succeeded by a scattering of small enterprises, electronic in the main, which have staved off decisive depression.

Viewed from the spur of Near Hill, where the fifth edifice, now called Congregationalist, of the religious society incorporated in 1635 on this identical spot thrusts its wooden spire into the sky and into a hundred colored postcards purchasable at all four local drugstores—viewed from this eminence, the business district makes a neat and prosperous impression. This is especially true at Christmastime, when colored lights are strung from pole to pole, and at the height of summer, when girls in shorts and bathing suits decorate the pavements. A one-hour parking limit is enforced during business hours, but the traffic is congested only during the evening homeward exodus. A stoplight has never been thought quite necessary. A new Woolworth’s with a noble façade of corrugated laminated Fiberglas has been erected on the site of a burned-out tenement. If the building which it vacated across the street went begging nearly a year for a tenant, and if some other properties along the street nervously change hands and wares now and then, nevertheless there is not that staring stretch of blank shopwindows which desolates the larger mill towns to the north and west. Two hardware stores confront each other without apparent rancor; three banks vie in promoting solvency; several luncheonettes withstand waves of factory workers and high-school students; and a small proud army of petit-bourgeois knights—realtors and lawyers and jewellers—parades up and down in clothes that would not look quaint on Madison Avenue. The explosive thrust of superhighways through the land has sprinkled on the town a cosmopolitan garnish; one resourceful divorcée has made a good thing of selling unabashedly smart women’s clothes and Scandinavian kitchen accessories, and, next door, a foolish young matron nostalgic for Vassar has opened a combination paperback bookstore and art gallery, so that now the Tarbox town derelict, in sneaking with his cherry-red face and tot of rye from the liquor store to his home above the shoe-repair nook, must walk a garish gauntlet of abstract paintings by a minister’s wife from Gloucester. Indeed, the whole street is laid open to an accusatory chorus of brightly packaged titles by Freud, Camus, and those others through whose masterworks our civilization moves toward its doom. Strange to say, so virulent is the spread of modern culture, some of these same titles can be had, seventy-five cents cheaper, in the homely old magazine-and-newspaper store in the middle of the block. Here, sitting stoically on the spines of the radiator behind the large left-hand window, the Indian can often be seen.

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He sits in this window for hours at a time, politely waving to any passerby who happens to glance his way. It is hard always to avoid his eye, his form is so unexpected, perched on the radiator above cards of pipes and pyramids of Prince Albert tins and fanned copies of *True* and *Male* and *Sport*. He looks, behind glass, somewhat shadowy and thin, but outdoors he is solid enough. During other hours he takes up a station by Bailey’s Pharmaceuticals on the corner. There is a splintered telephone pole here that he leans against when he wearies of leaning against the brick wall. Occasionally he even sits upon the fire hydrant as if upon a campstool, arms folded, legs crossed, gazing across at the renovations on the face of Poirier’s Liquor Mart. In cold or wet weather he may sit inside the drugstore, expertly prolonging a coffee at the counter, running his tobacco-dyed fingertip around and around the rim of the cup as he watches the steam fade. There are other spots—untenanted doorways, the benches halfway up the hill, idle chairs in the barbershops—where he loiters, and indeed there cannot be a square foot of the downtown pavement where he has not at some time or other paused; but these two spots, the window of the news store and the wall of the drugstore, are his essential habitat.

It is difficult to discover anything about him. He wears a plaid lumberjack shirt with a gray turtleneck sweater underneath, and chino pants olive rather than khaki in color, and remarkably white tennis sneakers. He smokes and drinks coffee, so he must have some income, but he does not, apparently, work. Inquiry reveals that now and then he is employed—during the last Christmas rush he was seen carrying baskets of Hong Kong shirts and Italian crèche elements through the aisles of the five-and-ten—but he soon is fired or quits, and the word “lazy,” given somehow more than its usual force of disapproval, sticks in the mind, as if this is the clue. Disconcertingly, he knows your name. Even though you are a young mutual-fund analyst newly bought into a neo-saltbox on the beach road and downtown on a Saturday morning to rent a wallpaper steamer, he smiles if he catches your eye, lifts his hand lightly, and says, “Good morning, Mr. ——,” supplying your name. Yet his own name is impossible to learn. The simplest fact about a person, identity’s very seed, is in his case utterly hidden. It can be determined, by matching consistencies of hearsay, that he lives in that tall, speckle-shingled, disreputable hotel overlooking the atrophied railroad tracks, just down from the Amvets, where shuffling Polish widowers and one-night-in-town salesmen hang out, and in whose bar, evidently, money can be wagered and women may be approached. But his name, whether it is given to you as Tugwell or Frisbee or Wigglesworth, even if it were always the same name, would be in its almost parodic Yankeeness incredible. “But he’s an Indian!”

The face of your informant—say, the chunky Irish dictator of the School Building Needs Committee, a dentist—undergoes a faint rapt transformation. His voice assumes its dental-chair coziness, an antiseptic murmur while your mouth is full. “Don’t go around saying that. He doesn’t like it. He prides himself on being a typical run-down Yankee.”

But he *is* an Indian. This is, alone, certain. Who but a savage would have such an immense capacity for repose? His cheekbones, his never-faded skin, the delicate little jut of his scowl, the drooping triangularity of his eye sockets, the way his vertically lined face takes the light, the lusteress black of his hair are all so profoundly Indian that the imagination, surprised by his silhouette as he sits on the hydrant gazing across at the changing face of the liquor store, effortlessly plants a feather at the back of his head. His air of waiting, of gazing; the softness of his motions; the proprietory ease and watchfulness with which he moves from spot to spot; the good humor that makes his vigil gently dreadful—all these are totally foreign to the shambling shy-eyes and moist lower lip of the failed Yankee. His age and status are too peculiar. He is surely older than forty and younger than sixty—but *is* this sure? And, though he greets everyone by name with a light wave of his hand, the conversation never passes beyond a greeting, and even in the news store, when the political contention and convivial obscenity literally drive housewives away from the door, he does not attempt to participate. He witnesses, and he now and then offers in a gravelly voice a debated piece of town history, but he does not participate.

It is caring that makes mysteries. As you grow indifferent, they lift. You live longer in the town, season follows season, the half-naked urban people arrive on the beach, multiply, and like leaves fall away again, and you have ceased to identify with them. The marshes turn green and withdraw through gold into brown, and their indolent, untouched, enduring existence penetrates your fibre. You find you must drive down toward the beach once a week or it is like a week without love. The ice cakes pile up along the banks of the tidal inlets like the rubble of ruined temples. You begin to meet, without seeking them out, the vestigial people: the unmarried daughters of the owners of closed mills, the retired high-school teachers, the senile deacons in their underheated seventeenth-century houses with attics full of old church records in spidery brown ink. You enter, by way of an elderly baby-sitter, a world where at least they speak of him as “the Indian.” An appalling snicker materializes in the darkness on the front seat beside you as you drive your babysitter, dear Mrs. Knowlton, home to her shuttered house on a back road. “If you knew what they say, mister, if you knew what they say.”

And at last, as when in a woods you break through miles of underbrush into a clearing, you stand up surprised, taking a deep breath of the obvious, agreeing with the trees that of course this is the case. Anybody who is anybody knew all along. The mystery lifts, with some impatience, here, in Miss Horne’s low-ceilinged front parlor, which smells of warm fireplace ashes and of peppermint balls kept ready in redtinted knobbed glass goblets for whatever open-mouthed children might dare to come visit such a very old lady, all bent double like a little gripping rose clump, Miss Horne, a fable in her lifetime. Her father had been the fifth minister before the present one (whom she does *not* care for) at the First Church, and *his* father the next but one before him. There had been a Horne among those first seventeen men. Well—where was she?—yes, the Indian. The Indian had been loitering in the center of town when she was a tiny girl in gingham. And he is no older now than he was then.