# Giving Blood

# John Updike

THE MAPLES had been married now nine years, which is almost too long. “Goddamn it, goddamn it,” Richard said to Joan, as they drove into Boston to give blood, “I drive this road five days a week and now I’m driving it again. It’s like a nightmare. I’m exhausted. I’m emotionally, mentally, physically exhausted, and she isn’t even an aunt of mine. She isn’t even an aunt of *yours*.”

“She’s a sort of cousin,” Joan said.

“Well, hell, every goddamn body in New England is some sort of cousin of yours; must I spend the rest of my life trying to save them *all*?”

“Hush,” Joan said. “She might die. I’m ashamed of you. Really ashamed.”

It cut. His voice for the moment took on an apologetic pallor. “Well, I’d be my usual goddamn saintly self if I’d had any sort of sleep last night. Five days a week I bump out of bed and stagger out the door past the milkman, and on the one day of the week when I don’t even have to truck the brats to Sunday school you make an appointment to have me drained dry thirty miles away.”

“Well, it wasn’t *me*,” Joan said, “who had to stay till two o’clock doing the Twist with Marlene Brossman.”

“We weren’t doing the Twist. We were gliding around very chastely to *Hits of the Forties*. And don’t think I was so oblivious I didn’t see you snoogling behind the piano with Harry Saxon.”

“We weren’t behind the piano, we were on the bench. And he was just talking to me because he felt sorry for me. Everybody there felt sorry for me; you could have at *least* let somebody else dance *once* with Marlene, if only for show.”

“Show, show,” Richard said. “That’s your mentality exactly.”

“Why, the poor Matthews or whatever they are looked absolutely horrified.”

“Matthiessons,” he said. “And that’s another thing. Why are idiots like that being invited these days? If there’s anything I hate, it’s women who keep putting one hand on their pearls and taking a deep breath. I thought she had something stuck in her throat.”

“They’re a perfectly pleasant, decent young couple. The thing you resent about their being there is that their relative innocence shows us what we’ve become.”

“If you’re so attracted,” he said, “to little fat men like Harry Saxon, why didn’t you marry one?”

“My,” Joan said calmly, and gazed out the window away from him, at the scudding gasoline stations. “You honestly *are* hateful. It’s not just a pose.”

“Pose, show, my Lord, who are you performing for? If it isn’t Harry Saxon, it’s Freddie Vetter—all these dwarfs. Every time I looked over at you last night it was like some pale Queen of the Dew surrounded by a ring of mushrooms.”

“You’re too absurd,” she said. Her hand, distinctly thirtyish, dry and green-veined and rasped by detergents, stubbed out her cigarette in the dashboard ashtray. “You’re not subtle. You think you can match me up with another man so you can swirl off with Marlene with a free conscience.”

Her reading his strategy so correctly made his face burn; he felt again the tingle of Mrs. Brossman’s hair as he pressed his cheek against hers and in this damp privacy inhaled the perfume behind her ear. “You’re right,” he said. “But I want to get you a man your own size; I’m very loyal that way.”

“Let’s not talk,” she said.

His hope, of turning the truth into a joke, was rebuked. Any implication of permission was blocked. “It’s that *smugness*,” he explained, speaking levelly, as if about a phenomenon of which they were both disinterested students. “It’s your smugness that is really intolerable. Your knee-jerk liberalism I don’t mind. Your sexlessness I’ve learned to live with. But that wonderfully smug, New England— I suppose we needed it to get the country founded, but in the Age of Anxiety it really does gall.”

He had been looking over at her, and unexpectedly she turned and looked at him, with a startled but uncannily crystalline expression, as if her face had been in an instant rendered in tinted porcelain, even to the eyelashes.

“I asked you not to talk,” Joan said. “Now you’ve said things that I’ll never forget.”

Plunged fathoms deep into the wrong, feeling suffocated by his guilt, he concentrated on the highway and sullenly steered. Though they were moving at sixty in the sparse Saturday traffic, Richard had travelled this road so often its distances were all translated into time, so that the car seemed to him to be moving as slowly as a minute hand from one digit to the next. It would have been strategic and dignified of him to keep the silence; but he could not resist believing that just one more pinch of syllables would restore the marital balance that with each wordless mile slipped increasingly awry. He asked, “How did Bean seem to you?” Bean was their baby. They had left her last night, to go to the party, with a fever of 102°.

Joan wrestled with her vow to say nothing, but maternal concern won out. She said, “Cooler. Her nose is a river.”

“Sweetie,” Richard blurted, “will they hurt me?” The curious fact was that he had never given blood before. Asthmatic and underweight, he had been 4-F, and at college and now at the office he had, less through his own determination than through the diffidence of the solicitors, evaded pledging blood. It was one of those tests of courage so trivial that no one had ever thought to make him face up to it.

Spring comes reluctantly to Boston. Speckled crusts of ice lingered around the parking meters, and the air, grayly stalemated between seasons, tinted the buildings along Longwood Avenue with a drab and homogeneous majesty. As they walked up the drive to the hospital entrance, Richard wondered aloud if they would see the King of Arabia.

“He’s in a separate wing,” Joan said. “With four wives.”

“Only four? What an ascetic.” And he made bold to tap his wife’s shoulder. It was not clear if, under the thickness of her winter coat, she felt it.

At the desk, they were directed down a long corridor floored with cigar-colored linoleum. Up and down, right and left it went, in the secretive, disjointed way peculiar to hospitals that have been built annex by annex. Richard felt like Hansel orphaned with Gretel; birds ate the bread crumbs behind them, and at last they timidly knocked on the witch’s door, which said BLOOD DONATION CENTER. A young man in white opened the door a crack. Over his shoulder Richard glimpsed—horrors!—a pair of dismembered female legs stripped of their shoes and laid parallel on a bed. Glints of needles and bottles pricked his eyes. Without widening the crack, the young man passed out to them two long forms. In sitting side by side on the waiting bench, spelling out their middle names and recalling their childhood diseases, Mr. and Mrs. Maple were newly defined to themselves. He fought down that urge to giggle and clown and lie that threatened him whenever he was asked—like a lawyer appointed by the court to plead a hopeless case—to present, as it were, his statistics to eternity. It seemed to mitigate his case slightly that a few of these statistics (present address, date of marriage) were shared by the hurt soul scratching beside him. He looked over her shoulder. “I never knew you had whooping cough.”

“My mother says. I don’t remember it.”

A pan crashed to a distant floor. An elevator chuckled remotely. A woman, a middle-aged woman top-heavy with rouge and fur, stepped out of the blood door and wobbled a moment on legs that looked familiar. They had been restored to their shoes. The heels of these shoes clicked firmly as, having raked the Maples with a dazed, defiant glance, she turned and disappeared around a bend in the corridor. The young man appeared in the doorway holding a pair of surgical tongs. His noticeably recent haircut made him seem an apprentice barber. He clicked his tongs and smiled. “Shall I do you together?”

“Sure.” It put Richard on his mettle that this callow fellow, to whom apparently they were to entrust their liquid essence, was so distinctly younger than they. But when Richard stood, his indignation melted and his legs felt diluted under him. And the extraction of the blood sample from his middle finger seemed about the nastiest and most needlessly prolonged physical involvement with another human being he had ever experienced. There is a touch that good dentists, mechanics, and barbers have, and this intern did not have it; he fumbled and in compensation was too rough. Again and again, an atrociously clumsy vampire, he tugged and twisted the purpling finger in vain. The tiny glass capillary tube remained transparent.

“He doesn’t like to bleed, does he?” the intern asked Joan. As relaxed as a nurse, she sat in a chair next to a table of scintillating equipment.

“I don’t think his blood moves much,” she said, “until after midnight.”

This stab at a joke made Richard in his extremity of fright laugh loudly, and the laugh at last seemed to jar the panicked coagulant. Red seeped upward in the thirsty little tube, as in a sudden thermometer.

The intern grunted in relief. As he smeared the samples on the analysis box, he explained idly, “What we ought to have down here is a pan of warm water. You just came in out of the cold. If you put your hand in hot water for a minute, the blood just pops out.”

“A pretty thought,” Richard said.

But the intern had already written him off as a clown and continued calmly to Joan, “All we’d need would be a baby hot plate for about six dollars, then we could make our own coffee, too. This way, when we get a donor who needs the coffee afterward, we have to send up for it while we keep her head between her knees. Do you think you’ll be needing coffee?”

*“No,”* Richard interrupted, jealous of their rapport.

The intern told Joan, “You’re O.”

“I know,” she said.

“And he’s A positive.”

“Why, that’s very good, Dick!” she called to him.

“Am I rare?” he asked.

The boy turned and explained, “O positive and A positive are the most common types. Who wants to be first?”

“Let me,” Joan said. “He’s never done it before.”

“Her full name is Joan of Arc,” Richard explained, angered at this betrayal, so unimpeachably selfless and smug.

The intern, threatened in his element, fixed his puzzled eyes on the floor between them and said, “Take off your shoes and each get on a bed.” He added, “*Please*,” and all three laughed, one after the other, the intern last.

The beds were at right angles to one another along two walls. Joan lay down and from her husband’s angle of vision was novelly foreshortened. He had never before seen her quite this way, the combed crown of her hair so poignant, her bared arm so silver and long, her stocking feet toed in so childishly and helplessly. There were no pillows on the beds, and lying flat made him feel tipped head down; the illusion of floating encouraged his hope that this unreal adventure would soon dissolve, as dreams do. “You O.K.?”

“Are you?” Her voice came softly from the tucked-under wealth of her hair. Her parting was so straight it seemed a mother had brushed it. He watched a long needle sink into the flat of her arm and a piece of moist cotton clumsily swab the spot. He had imagined their blood would be drained into cans or bottles, but the intern, whose breathing was now the only sound within the room, brought to Joan’s side what looked like a miniature plastic knapsack, all coiled and tied. His body cloaked his actions. When he stepped away, a plastic cord had been grafted, a transparent vine, to the flattened crook of Joan’s extended arm, where the skin was translucent and the veins were faint blue tributaries shallowly buried. It was a tender, vulnerable place where in courting days she had liked being stroked. Now, without visible transition, the pale tendril planted here went dark red. Richard wanted to cry out.

The instant readiness of her blood to leave her body pierced him like a physical pang. Though he had not so much as blinked, its initial leap had been too quick for his eye. He had expected some visible sign of flow, but from the mere appearance of it the tiny looped hose might be pouring blood *into* her body or might be a curved line added, like an impudent mustache, to a painting. The fixed position of his head gave what he saw a certain flatness.

And now the intern turned to him, and there was the tiny felt prick of the Novocain needle, and then the coarse, half-felt intrusion of something resembling a medium-weight nail. Twice the boy mistakenly probed for the vein and the third time taped the successful graft fast with adhesive tape. All the while, Richard’s mind moved aloofly among the constellations of the stained, cracked ceiling. What was being done to him did not bear contemplating. When the intern moved away to hum and tinkle among his instruments, Joan craned her neck to show her husband her face and, upside down in his vision, grotesquely smiled, her mouth where her eyes should have been, her eyes a broken, blinking mouth.

It was not many minutes that they lay there at right angles together, but the time passed as something beyond the walls, as something mixed with the faraway clatter of pans and the approach and retreat of footsteps and the opening and closing of unseen doors. Here, conscious of a pointed painless pulse in the inner hinge of his arm but incurious as to what it looked like, he floated and imagined how his soul would float free when all his blood was underneath the bed. His blood and Joan’s merged on the floor, and together their spirits glided from crack to crack, from star to star on the ceiling. Once she cleared her throat, and the sound was like the rasp of a pebble loosened by a cliff-climber’s boot.

The door opened. Richard turned his head and saw an old man, bald and sallow, enter and settle in a chair. He was one of those old men who hold within an institution an ill-defined but secure place. The young doctor seemed to know him, and the two talked, quietly, as if not to disturb the mystical union of the couple sacrificially bedded together. They talked of persons and events that meant nothing—of Iris, of Dr. Greenstein, of Ward D, again of Iris, who had given the old man an undeserved scolding, of the shameful lack of a hot plate to make coffee on, of the rumored black bodyguards who kept watch with scimitars by the bed of the glaucomatous king. Through Richard’s tranced ignorance these topics passed as clouds of impression, iridescent, massy—Dr. Greenstein with a pointed nose and almond eyes the color of ivy, Iris eighty feet tall and hurling sterilized thunderbolts of wrath. As in some theologies the proliferating deities are said to exist as ripples upon the featureless ground of Godhead, so these inconstant images lightly overlay his continuous awareness of Joan’s blood, like his own, ebbing. Linked to a common loss, they were chastely conjoined; the thesis developed upon him that the hoses attached to them met somewhere out of sight. Testing this belief, he glanced down and saw that indeed the plastic vine taped to the flattened crook of his arm was the same dark red as hers. He stared at the ceiling to disperse a sensation of faintness.

Abruptly the young intern left off his desultory conversation and moved to Joan’s side. There was a chirp of clips. When he moved away, she was revealed holding her naked arm upright, pressing a piece of cotton against it with the other hand. Without pausing, the intern came to Richard’s side, and the birdsong of clips repeated, nearer. “Look at that,” he said to his elderly friend. “I started him two minutes later than her and he’s finished at the same time.”

“Was it a race?” Richard asked.

Clumsily firm, the boy fitted Richard’s fingers to a pad and lifted his arm for him. “Hold it there for five minutes,” he said.

“What’ll happen if I don’t?”

“You’ll mess up your shirt.” To the old man he said, “I had a woman in here the other day, she was all set to leave when, all of a sudden—pow!—all over the front of this beautiful linen dress. She was going to Symphony.”

“Then they try to sue the hospital for the cleaning bill,” the old man muttered.

“Why was I slower than him?” Joan asked. Her upright arm wavered, as if vexed or weakened.

“The woman generally is,” the boy told her. “Nine times out of ten, the man is faster. Their hearts are so much stronger.”

“Is that really so?”

“Sure it’s so,” Richard told her. “Don’t argue with medical science.”

“Woman up in Ward C,” the old man said, “they saved her life for her out of an auto accident and now I hear she’s suing because they didn’t find her dental plate.”

Under such patter, the five minutes eroded. Richard’s upheld arm began to ache. It seemed that he and Joan were caught together in a classroom where they would never be recognized, or in a charade that would never be guessed, the correct answer being Two Silver Birches in a Meadow.

“You can sit up now if you want,” the intern told them. “But don’t let go of the venipuncture.”

They sat up on their beds, legs dangling heavily. Joan asked him, “Do you feel dizzy?”

“With my powerful heart? Don’t be presumptuous.”

“Do you think he’ll need coffee?” the intern asked her. “I’ll have to send up for it now.”

The old man shifted forward in his chair, preparing to heave to his feet.

“I do *not* want any *cof*fee”—Richard said it so loud he saw himself transposed, a lesser Iris, into the firmament of the old man’s aggrieved gossip. *Some dizzy bastard down in the blood room, I get up to get him some coffee and he damn near bit my head off*. To demonstrate simultaneously his essential good humor and his total presence of mind, Richard gestured toward the blood they had given—two square plastic sacks filled solidly fat—and declared, “Back where I come from in West Virginia sometimes you pick a tick off a dog that looks like that.” The men looked at him amazed. Had he not quite said what he meant to say? Or had they never seen anybody from West Virginia before?

Joan pointed at the blood, too. “Is that us? Those little doll pillows?”

“Maybe we should take one home to Bean,” Richard suggested.

The intern did not seem convinced that this was a joke. “Your blood will be credited to Mrs. Henryson’s account,” he stated stiffly.

Joan asked him, “Do you know anything about her? When is she—when is her operation scheduled?”

“I think for tomorrow. The only thing on the tab this after is an open heart at two; that’ll take about sixteen pints.”

“Oh …” Joan was shaken. “Sixteen … that’s a full person, isn’t it?”

“More,” the intern answered, with the regal handwave that bestows largesse and dismisses compliments.

“Could we visit her?” Richard asked, for Joan’s benefit. (“Really ashamed,” she had said; it had cut.) He was confident of the refusal.

“Well, you can ask at the desk, but usually before a major one like this it’s just the nearest of kin. I guess you’re safe now.” He meant their punctures. Richard’s arm bore a small raised bruise; the intern covered it with one of those ample salmon, unhesitatingly adhesive bandages that only hospitals have. That was their specialty, Richard thought—packaging. They wrap the human mess for final delivery. Sixteen doll’s pillows, uniformly dark and snug, marching into an open heart: the vision momentarily satisfied his hunger for order.

He rolled down his sleeve and slid off the bed. It startled him to realize, in the instant before his feet touched the floor, that three pairs of eyes were fixed upon him, fascinated and apprehensive and eager for scandal. He stood and towered above them. He hopped on one foot to slip into one loafer, and then on this foot to slip into the other loafer. Then he did the little shuffle-tap, shuffle-tap step that was all that remained to him of dancing lessons he had taken at the age of seven, driving twelve miles each Saturday into Clarksburg. He made a small bow toward his wife, smiled at the old man, and said to the intern, “All my life people have been expecting me to faint. I have no idea why. I haven’t fainted yet.”

His coat and overcoat felt a shade queer, a bit slithery and light, but as he walked down the length of the corridor, space seemed to adjust snugly around him. At his side, Joan kept an inquisitive and chastened silence. They pushed through the great glass doors. A famished sun was nibbling through the overcast. Above and behind them, the King of Arabia lay in a drugged dream of dunes and Mrs. Henryson upon her sickbed received, like the comatose mother of twins, their identical packets of blood. Richard hugged his wife’s shoulders and as they walked along leaning on each other whispered, “Hey, I love you. Love love *love* you.”

Romance is, simply, the strange, the untried. It was unusual for the Maples to be driving together at eleven in the morning. Almost always it was dark when they shared a car. The oval of her face clung in the corner of his eye. She was watching him, alert to take the wheel if he suddenly lost consciousness. He felt tender toward her in the eggshell light, and curious toward himself, wondering how far beneath his brain the black pit did lie. He felt no different; but, then, the quality of consciousness perhaps did not bear introspection. Something surely had been taken from him; he was less himself by a pint. Yet the earth, with its signals and buildings and cars and bricks, continued like a pedalled note.

Boston behind them, he asked, “Where should we eat?”

“Should we eat?”

“Please, yes. Let me take you to lunch. Just like a secretary.”

“I do feel sort of illicit. As if I’ve stolen something.”

“You, too? But what did we steal?”

“I don’t know. The morning? Do you think Eve knows enough to feed them?” Eve was their sitter, a little bony girl from down the street who would, in exactly a year, Richard calculated, be painfully lovely. They lasted three years on the average, sitters; you got them in the tenth grade and escorted them into their bloom and then, with graduation, like commuters who had reached their stop, they dropped out of sight, into college or marriage. And the train went on, and took on other passengers, and itself became older and longer.

“She’ll manage,” he told her. “What would you like? All that talk about coffee has made me frantic for some.”

“At the Pancake House beyond 128 they give you coffee before you even ask.”

“Pancakes? Now? Aren’t you jolly? Do you think we’ll throw up?”

“Do you feel like throwing up?”

“No, not really. I feel sort of insubstantial and gentle, but it’s probably psychosomatic. I don’t really understand this business of giving something away and still somehow having it. What is it—the spleen?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Are the splenetic man and the sanguine man the same?”

“God. I’ve totally forgotten the humors. What are the others—phlegm and choler?”

“Bile and black bile are in there somewhere.”

“One thing about you, Joan. You’re educated. New England women are educated.”

“Sexless as we are.”

“That’s right; drain me dry and then put me on the rack.” But there was no wrath in his words; indeed, he had reminded her of their earlier conversation so that, in much this way, his words might be revived, diluted, and erased. It seemed to work. The restaurant where they served only pancakes was empty and quiet this early. A bashfulness possessed them both, and a silence while they ate. Touched by the stain her blueberry pancakes left on her teeth, he held a match to her cigarette and said, “Gee, I loved you back in the blood room.”

“I wonder why.”

“You were so brave.”

“So were you.”

“But I’m supposed to be. I’m paid to be. It’s the price of having a penis.”

“Shh.”

“Hey. I didn’t mean that about your being sexless.”

The waitress refilled their coffee cups and gave them the check.

“And I promise never never to do the Twist, the cha-cha, or the schottische with Marlene Brossman.”

“Don’t be silly. I don’t care.”

This amounted to permission, but perversely irritated him. That above-it-all quality; why didn’t she *fight*? Trying to regain their peace, scrambling uphill, he picked up their check and with an effort of acting, the pretense being that they were out on a date and he was a raw dumb suitor, said handsomely, “I’ll pay.”

But on looking into his wallet he saw only a single worn dollar there. He didn’t know why this should make him so angry, except the fact somehow that it was only *one*. “Goddamn it,” he said. “Look at that.” He waved it in her face. “I work like a bastard all week for you and those insatiable brats and at the end of it what do I have? One goddamn crummy wrinkled dollar.”

Her hands dropped to the pocketbook beside her on the seat, but her gaze stayed with him, her face having retreated, or advanced, into that porcelain shell of uncanny composure. “We’ll both pay,” Joan said.