# Marching through Boston

# John Updike

THE CIVIL-RIGHTS MOVEMENT had a salubrious effect on Joan Maple. A suburban mother of four, she would return late at night from a non-violence class in Roxbury with rosy cheeks and shining eyes, eager to describe, while sipping Benedictine, her indoctrination. ‘This huge man in overalls —’

A Negro?’ her husband asked.

Of course. This huge man, with a *very* refined vocabulary, told us if we march anywhere, especially in the South, to let the Negro men march on the outside, because it’s important for their self-esteem to be able to protect us. He told us about a New York fashion designer who went down to Selma and said she could take care of herself. Furthermore, she flirted with the state troopers. They finally told her to go home.’

‘I thought you were supposed to love the troopers,’ Richard said.

Only abstractly. Not on your own. You mustn’t do *anything* within the movement as an individual. By flirting, she gave the trooper an opportunity to feel contempt.’

‘She blocked his transference, as it were.’

‘Don’t laugh. It’s all very psychological. The man told us, those who want to march, to face our ego-gratificational motives no matter how irrelevant they are and then put them behind us. Once you’re in a march, you have no identity. It’s elegant. It’s beautiful.’

He had never known her like this. It seemed to Richard that her posture was improving, her figure filling out, her skin growing lustrous, her very hair gaining body and sheen. Though he had resigned himself, through twelve years of marriage, to a rhythm of apathy and renewal, he distrusted this raw burst of beauty.

The night she returned from Alabama, it was three o’clock in the morning. He woke and heard the front door close behind her. He had been dreaming of a parallelogram in the sky that was also somehow a meteor, and the darkened house seemed quadrisected by the four sleeping children he had, with more than paternal tenderness, put to bed. He had caught himself speaking to them of Mommy as a distant departed spirit, gone to live, invisible, in the newspapers and the television set. The little girl, Bean, had burst into tears. Now the ghost closed the door and walked up the stairs, and came into his bedroom, and fell on the bed.

He switched on the light and saw her sunburned face, her blistered feet. Her ballet slippers were caked with orange mud. She had lived for three days on Coke and dried apricots; at one stretch she had not gone to the bathroom for sixteen hours. The Montgomery airport had been a madhouse — nuns, social workers, divinity students fighting for space on the northbound planes. They had been in the air when they heard about Mrs Liuzzo.

He accused her: ‘It could have been you.’

She said, ‘I was always in a group.’ But she added guiltily, ‘How were the children?’

‘Fine. Bean cried because she thought you were inside the television set.’

‘Did you see me?’

‘Your parents called long-distance to say they thought they did. I didn’t. All I saw was Abernathy and King and their henchmen saying, “Thass right. Say it, man. Thass sayin’ it.”’

‘Aren’t you mean? It was very moving, except that we were all so tired. These teen-age Negro girls kept fainting; a psychiatrist explained to me that they were having psychotic breaks.’

‘What psychiatrist?’

‘Actually, there were three of them, and they were studying to be psychiatrists in Philadelphia. They kind of took me in tow.’

‘I bet they did. Please come to bed. I’m very tired from being a mother.’

She visited the four corners of the upstairs to inspect each sleeping child and, returning, undressed in the dark. She removed underwear she had worn for seventy hours and stood there shining; to the sleepy man in the bed it seemed a visitation, and he felt as people of old must have felt when greeted by an angel — adoring yet resentful, at this flamboyant proof of a level of existence above theirs.

She spoke on the radio; she addressed local groups. In garages and supermarkets he heard himself being pointed out as her husband. She helped organize meetings at which dapper young Negroes ridiculed and abused the applauding suburban audience. Richard marvelled at Joan’s public composure. Her shyness stayed with her, but it had become a kind of weapon, as if the doctrine of non-violence had given it point. Her voice, as she phoned evasive local real-estate agents in the campaign for fair housing, grew curiously firm and rather obstinately melodious — a note her husband had not heard in her voice before. He grew jealous and irritable. He found himself insisting, at parties, on the constitutional case for states’ rights, on the misfortunes of African independence, on the history of Reconstruction from the South’s point of view. Yet she had little trouble persuading him to march with her in Boston.

He promised, though he could not quite grasp the object of the march. All mass movements, of masses or of ideas supposedly embodied in masses, felt unreal to him. Whereas his wife, a liberal theology professor’s daughter, lived by abstractions; her blood returned to her heart enriched by the passage through some capillarious good cause. He was struck, and subtly wounded, by the ardor with which she rewarded his promise; under his hands her body felt baroque and her skin smooth as night.

The march was in April. Richard awoke that morning with a fever. He had taken something foreign into himself and his body was making resistance. Joan offered to go alone; as if something fundamental to his dignity, to their marriage, were at stake, he refused the offer. The day, dawning cloudy, had been forecast as sunny, and he wore a summer suit that enclosed his hot skin in a slipping, weightless unreality. At a highway drugstore they bought some pills designed to detonate inside him through a twelve-hour period. They parked near her aunt’s house in Louisburg Square and took a taxi toward the headwaters of the march, a playground in Roxbury. The Irish driver’s impassive back radiated disapproval. The cab was turned aside by a policeman; the Maples got out and walked down a broad brown boulevard lined with barbershops, shoe-repair nooks, pizzerias, and friendliness associations. On stoops and stairways male Negroes loitered, blinking and muttering toward one another as if a vast, decrepit conspiracy had assigned them their positions and then collapsed.

‘Lovely architecture,’ Joan said, pointing toward a curving side street, a neo-Georgian arc suspended in the large urban sadness.

Though she pretended to know where she was, Richard doubted that they were going the right way. But then he saw ahead of them, scattered like the anomalous objects with which Dalí punctuates his perspectives, receding black groups of white clergymen. In the distance, the hot lights of police cars wheeled within a twinkling mob. As they drew nearer, colored girls made into giantesses by bouffant hairdos materialized beside them. One wore cerise stretch pants and the golden sandals of a heavenly cupbearer, and held pressed against her ear a transistor radio tuned to WMEX. On this thin stream of music they all together poured into a playground surrounded by a link fence.

A loose crowd of thousands swarmed on the crushed grass. Bobbing placards advertised churches, brotherhoods, schools, towns. Popsicle vendors lent an unexpected touch of carnival. Suddenly at home, Richard bought a bag of peanuts and looked around — as if this were the playground of his childhood — for friends.

But it was Joan who found some. ‘My God,’ she said. ‘There’s my old analyst.’ At the fringe of some Unitarians stood a plump, doughy man with the troubled squint of a baker who has looked into too many ovens. Joan turned to go the other way.

‘Don’t suppress,’ Richard told her. ‘Let’s go and be friendly and normal.’

‘It’s too embarrassing.’

‘But it’s been years since you went. You’re cured.’

‘You don’t understand. You’re never cured. You just stop going.’

‘O.K., come *this* way. I think I see my Harvard section man in Plato to Dante.’

But, even while arguing against it, she had been drifting them toward her psychiatrist, and now they were caught in the pull of his gaze. He scowled and came toward them, flat-footedly. Richard had never met him and, shaking hands, felt himself as a putrid heap of anecdotes, of detailed lusts and abuses. ‘I think I need a doctor,’ he madly blurted.

The other man produced, like a stiletto from his sleeve, a nimble smile. ‘How so?’ Each word seemed precious.

‘I have a fever.’

‘Ah.’ The psychiatrist turned sympathetically to Joan, and his face issued a clear commiseration: *So he is still punishing you*.

Joan said loyally, ‘He really does. I saw the thermometer.’

‘Would you like a peanut?’ Richard asked. The offer felt so symbolic, so transparent, that he was shocked when the other man took one, cracked it harshly, and substantially chewed.

Joan asked, ‘Are you with anybody? I feel a need for group security.’

‘Come meet my sister.’ The command sounded strange to Richard; ‘sister’ seemed a piece of psychological slang, a euphemism.

But again things were simpler than they seemed. His sister was plainly from the same batter. Rubicund and yeasty, she seemed to have been enlarged by the exercise of good will and wore a saucer-sized SCLC button in the lapel of a coarse green suit. Richard coveted the suit; it looked warm. The day was continuing overcast and chilly. Something odd, perhaps the successive explosions of the antihistamine pill, was happening inside him, making him feel queerly elongated; the illusion crossed his mind that he was destined to seduce this woman. She beamed and said, ‘My daughter Trudy and her *best* friend, Carol.’

They were girls of sixteen or so, one size smaller in their bones than women. Trudy had the family pastry texture and a darting frown. Carol was homely, fragile, and touching; her upper teeth were a gray blur of braces and her arms were protectively folded across her skimpy bosom. Over a white blouse she wore only a thin blue sweater, unbuttoned. Richard told her, ‘You’re freezing.’

‘I’m freezing,’ she said, and a small love was established between them on the basis of this demure repetition. She added, ‘I came along because I’m writing a term paper.’

Trudy said, ‘She’s doing a history of the labor unions,’ and laughed unpleasantly.

The girl shivered. ‘I thought they might be the same. Didn’t the unions use to march?’ Her voice, moistened by the obtrusion of her braces, had a sprayey faintness in the raw gray air.

The psychiatrist’s sister said, ‘The *way* they *make* these poor children *study* nowadays! The *books* they have them *read* ! Their *English* teacher *assigned* them *Tropic of Cancer*! I picked it *up* and read *one page*, and Trudy reassured me, “It’s all *right*, Mother, the teacher says he’s a transcen*dent*alist!”’

It felt to Richard less likely that he would seduce her. His sense of reality was expanding in the nest of warmth these people provided. He offered to buy them all Popsicles. His consciousness ventured outward and tasted the joy of so many Negro presences, the luxury of immersion in the polished shadows of their skins. He drifted happily through the crosshatch of their oblique, sardonic hooting and blurred voices, searching for the Popsicle vendor. The girls and Trudy’s mother had said they would take one; the psychiatrist and Joan had refused. The crowd was formed of jiggling fragments. Richard waved at the rector of a church whose nursery school his children had attended; winked at a folk singer he had seen on television and who looked lost and wan in three dimensions; assumed a stony face in passing a long-haired youth guarded by police and draped in a signboard proclaiming MARTIN LUTHER KING A TOOL OF THE COMMUNISTS; and tapped a tall bald man on the shoulder. ‘Remember me? Dick Maple, Plato to Dante, B-plus.’

The section man turned, bespectacled and pale. It was shocking; he had aged.

The march was slow to start. Trucks and police cars appeared and disappeared at the playground gate. Officious young seminarians tried to organize the crowd into lines. Unintelligible announcements crackled within the loudspeakers. Martin Luther King was a dim religious rumor on the playground plain — now here, now there, now absent, now present. The sun showed as a kind of sore spot burning through the clouds. Carol nibbled her Popsicle and shivered. Richard and Joan argued whether to march under the Danvers banner with the psychiatrist or with the Unitarians. In the end it did not matter; King invisibly established himself at their head, a distant truck loaded with singing women lurched forward, a far corner of the crowd began to croon, ‘Which side are you on, boy?,’ and the marching began.

On Columbus Avenue they were shuffled into lines ten abreast. The Maples were separated. Joan turned up between her psychiatrist and a massive, doleful African wearing tribal scars, sneakers, and a Harvard Athletic Association sweatshirt. Richard found himself in the line ahead, with Carol beside him. Someone behind him, a forward-looking liberal, stepped on his heel, giving the knit of his loafer such a wrench that he had to walk the three miles through Boston with a floppy shoe and a slight limp. He had been born in West Virginia and did not understand Boston. In ten years he had grown familiar with some of its districts, but was still surprised by the quick curving manner in which these districts interlocked. For a few blocks they marched between cheering tenements from whose topmost windows hung banners that proclaimed END DE FACTO SEGREGATION and RETIRE MRS HICKS. Then the march turned left, and Richard was passing Symphony Hall, within whose rectangular vault he had often dreamed his way along the deep-grassed meadows of Brahms and up the agate cliffs of Strauss. At this corner, from the Stygian subway kiosk, he had emerged with Joan — Orpheus and Eurydice — when both were students; in this restaurant, a decade later, he and she, on three drinks apiece, had decided not to get a divorce that week. The new Prudential Tower, taller and somehow fainter than any other building, haunted each twist of their march, before their faces like a mirage, at their backs like a memory. A leggy nervous colored girl wearing the orange fireman’s jacket of the Security Unit shepherded their section of the line, clapping her hands, shouting freedom-song lyrics for a few bars. These songs struggled through the miles of the march, overlapping and eclipsing one another. ‘Which side are you on, boy, which side are you on … like a tree-ee planted by the wah-ha-ter, we shall not be moved … this little light of mine, gonna shine on Boston, Mass., this little light of mine …’ The day continued cool and without shadows. Newspapers that he had folded inside his coat for warmth slipped and slid. Carol beside him plucked at her little sweater, gathering it at her bosom but unable, as if under a spell, to button it. In the line behind him, Joan, secure between her id and superego, stepped along, swinging her arms, throwing her ballet slippers alternately outward in a confident splaying stride. ‘… let ‘er shine, let ‘er shine …’

Incredibly, they were traversing a cloverleaf, an elevated concrete arabesque devoid of cars. Their massed footsteps whispered; the city yawned beneath them. The march had no beginning and no end that Richard could see. Within him, the fever had become a small glassy scratching on the walls of the pit hollowed by the detonating pills. A piece of newspaper spilled down his legs and blew into the air. Impalpably medicated, ideally motivated, he felt, strolling along the curve of the cloverleaf, gathered within an irresistible ascent. He asked Carol, ‘Where are we going?’

‘The newspapers said the Common.’

‘Do you feel faint?’

Her gray braces shyly modified her smile. ‘Hungry.’

‘Have a peanut.’ A few still remained in his pocket.

‘Thank you.’ She took one. ‘You don’t have to be paternal.’

‘I want to be.’ He felt strangely exalted and excited, as if destined to give birth. He wanted to share this sensation with Carol, but instead he asked her, ‘In your study of the labor movement, have you learned much about the Molly Maguires?’

‘No. Were they goons or finks?’

‘I think they were either coal miners or gangsters.’

‘Oh. I haven’t studied about anything earlier than Gompers.’

‘Sounds good.’ Suppressing the urge to tell Carol he loved her, he turned to look at Joan. She was beautiful, like a poster, with far-seeing blue eyes and red lips parted in song.

Now they walked beneath office buildings where like mounted butterflies secretaries and dental technicians were pressed against the glass. In Copley Square, stony shoppers waited forever to cross the street. Along Boylston, there was Irish muttering; he shielded Carol with his body. The desultory singing grew defiant. The Public Garden was beginning to bloom. Statues of worthies — Channing, Kosciuszko, Cass, Phillips — were trundled by beneath the blurring trees; Richard’s dry heart cracked like a book being opened. The march turned left down Charles and began to press against itself, to link arms, to fumble for love. He lost sight of Joan in the crush. Then they were treading on grass, on the Common, and the first drops of rain, sharp as needles, pricked their faces and hands.

‘Did we have to stay to hear every damn speech?’ Richard asked. They were at last heading home; he felt too sick to drive and huddled, in his soaked, slippery suit, toward the heater. The windshield wiper seemed to be squeaking *freedom*, *free-dom*.

‘I wanted to hear King.’

‘You heard him in Alabama.’

‘I was too tired to listen then.’

‘Did you listen this time? Didn’t it seem corny and forced?’

‘Somewhat. But does it matter?’ Her white profile was serene; she passed a trailer truck on the right, and her window was spattered as if with applause.

‘And that Abernathy. God, if he’s John the Baptist, I’m Herod the Great. “Onteel de Frenchman go back t’France, onteel de Ahrishman go back t’Ahrland, onteel de Mexican, he go back tuh —”’

‘Stop it.’

‘Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t mind them sounding like demagogues; what I minded was that godawful boring phony imitation of a revival meeting. “Thass right, yossuh. Yos-*suh*!”’

‘Your throat sounds sore. Shouldn’t you stop using it?’

‘*How* could you crucify me that way? *How* could you make this miserable sick husband stand in the icy rain for hours listening to boring stupid speeches that you’d heard before anyway?’

‘I didn’t think the speeches were that great. But I think it was important that they were given and that people listened. You were there as a witness, Richard.’

‘Ah witnessed. Ah believes. Yos-suh.’

‘You’re a very sick man.’

‘I know, I *know* I am. That’s why I wanted to leave. Even your pasty psychiatrist left. He looked like a dunked doughnut.’

‘He left because of the girls.’

‘I loved Carol. She respected me, despite the color of my skin.’

‘You didn’t have to go.’

‘Yes I did. You somehow turned it into a point of honor. It was a sexual vindication.’

‘How you go on.’

“‘Onteel de East German goes on back t’East Germany, onteel de Luxembourgian hies hisself back to Luxembourg —”’

‘Please stop it.’

But he found he could not stop, and even after they reached home and she put him to bed, the children watching in alarm, his voice continued its slurred plaint. ‘Ah’ze all raht, missy, jes’ a tetch o’ double pneu*mon*ia, don’t you fret none, we’ll get the cotton in.’

‘You’re embarrassing the children.’

‘Shecks, doan min’ me, chilluns. Ef Ah could jes’ res’ hyah foh a spell in de shade o’ de watuhmelon patch, res’ dese ol’ bones … Lawzy, dat do feel good!’

‘Daddy has a tiny cold,’ Joan explained.

‘Will he die?’ Bean asked, and burst into tears.

‘Now, effen,’ he said, ‘bah some un*foh*-choonut chayunce, mah spirrut should pass owen, bureh me bah de levee, so mebbe Ah kin heeah de singin’ an’ de banjos an’ de cotton bolls abustin’ … an’ mebbe even de whaat folks up in de Big House kin shed a homely tear er two….’ He was almost crying; a weird tenderness had crept over him in bed, as if he had indeed given birth, birth to this voice, a voice crying for attention from the depths of oppression. High in the window, the late-afternoon sky blanched as the storm lifted. In the warmth of the bed, Richard crooned to himself, and once cried out, ‘Missy! Missy! Doan you worreh none, ol’ Tom’ll see anotheh sun-up!’

But Joan was downstairs, talking firmly on the telephone.