# The Stare

# John Updike

THEN THERE IT WAS, in the corner of his eye. He turned, his heart frozen. The incredibility of her being here, now, at a table in this one restaurant on the one day when he was back in the city, did not check the anticipatory freezing of his heart, for when they had both lived in New York they had always been lucky at finding each other, time after time; and this would be one more time. Already, in the instant between recognition and turning, he had framed his first words; he would rise, with the diffidence she used to think graceful, and go to her and say, “Hey. It’s you.”

Her face would smile apologetically, lids lowered, and undergo one of its little shrugs. “It’s me.”

“I’m so glad. I’m so sorry about what happened.” And everything would be understood, and the need of forgiveness once again magically put behind them, like a wall of paper flames they had passed through.

It was someone else, a not very young woman whose hair, not really the color of her hair at all, had, half seen, suggested the way her hair, centrally parted and pulled back into a glossy French roll, would cut with two dark wings into her forehead, making her brow seem low and intense and emphasizing her stare. He felt the eyes of his companions at lunch question him, and he returned his attention to them, his own eyes smarting from the effort of trying to press this unknown woman’s appearance into the appearance of another. One of his companions at the table—a gentle gray banker whose affection for him, like a generous check, quietly withheld at the bottom a tiny deduction of tact, a modest minus paid as the fee for their mutual security—smiled in such a way as to balk his impulse to blurt, to confess. His other companion was an elderly female underwriter, an ex-associate, whose statistical insight was remorseless but who in personal manner was all feathers and feigned dismay. “I’m seeing ghosts,” he explained to her, and she nodded, for they had, all three, with the gay, withering credulity of nonbelievers, been discussing ghosts. The curtain of conversation descended again, but his palms tingled, and, as if trapped between two mirrors, he seemed to face a diminishing multiplication of her stare.

The first time they met, in an apartment with huge slablike paintings and fragile furniture that seemed to be tiptoeing, she had come to the defense of something her husband had said, and he had irritably wondered how a woman of such evident spirit and will could debase herself to the support of statements so asinine, and she must have felt, across the room, his irritation, for she gave him her stare. It was, as a look, both blunt and elusive: somewhat cold, certainly hard, yet curiously wide, and even open—its essential ingredient shied away from being named. Her eyes were the only glamorous feature of a freckled, bony, tomboyish face, remarkable chiefly for its sharp willingness to express pleasure. When she laughed, her teeth were bared like a skull’s, and when she stared, her great, grave, perfectly shaped eyes insisted on their shape as rigidly as a statue’s.

Later, when their acquaintance had outlived the initial irritations, he had met her in the Museum of Modern Art, amid an exhibit of old movie stills, and, going forward with the innocent cheerfulness that her presence even then aroused in him, he had been unexpectedly met by her stare. “We missed you Friday night,” she said.

“You did? What happened Friday night?”

“Oh, nothing. We just gave a little party and expected you to come.”

“We weren’t invited.”

“But you *were*. I phoned your wife.”

“She never said anything to me. She must have forgotten.”

“Well, I don’t suppose it matters.”

“But it *does*. I’m so sorry. I would have loved to have come. It’s very funny that she forgot it; she really just lives for parties.”

“Yes.” And her stare puzzled him, since it was no longer directed at him; the hostility between the two women existed before he had fulfilled its reason.

Later still, at a party they all did attend, he had, alone with her for a moment, kissed her, and the response of her mouth had been disconcerting; backing off, expecting to find in her face the moist, formless warmth that had taken his lips, he encountered her stare instead. In the months that unfolded from this, it had been his pleasure to see her stare relax. Her body gathered softness under his; late one night, after yet another party, his wife, lying beside him in the pre-dawn darkness of her ignorance, had remarked, with the cool, fair appraisal of a rival woman, how beautiful she—*she*, the other—had become, and he had felt, half dreaming in the warm bed he had betrayed, justified. Her laugh no longer flashed out so hungrily, and her eyes, brimming with the secret he and she had made, deepened and seemed to rejoin the girlishness that had lingered in the other features of her face. Seeing her across a room standing swathed in the beauty he had given her, he felt a creator’s, a father’s, pride. There existed, when they came together, a presence of tenderness like a ghostly child who when they parted was taken away and set to sleeping. Yet even in those months, in the depths of their secret, as they lay together as if in a padded dungeon, discussing with a gathering urgency what they would do when their secret crumbled and they were exposed, there would now and then glint out at him, however qualified by tears and languor, the unmistakable accusatory hardness. It was accusing, yet that was not its essence; his conscience shied away from naming the pressure that had formed it and that, it imperceptibly became apparent, he was helpless to relieve. Each time they parted, she would leave behind, in the last instant before the door closed, a look that stayed with him, vibrating like a struck cymbal.

The last time he saw her, all the gentle months had been stripped away and her stare, naked, had become furious. “Don’t you love me?” Two households were in turmoil and the rich instinct that had driven him to her had been transformed to a thin need to hide and beg.

“Not enough.” He meant it simply, as a fact, as something that already had been made plain.

But she took it as a death blow, and in a face whitened and drawn by the shocks of recent days, from beneath dark wings of tensely parted hair, her stare revived into a life so coldly controlled and adamantly hostile that for weeks he could not close his eyes without confronting it—much as a victim of torture must continue to see the burning iron with which he was blinded.

Now, back in New York, walking alone, soothed by food and profitable talk, he discovered himself so healed that his wound ached to be reopened. The glittering city bristled with potential prongs. The pale disc of every face, as it slipped from the edge of his vision, seemed to cup the possibility of being hers. He felt her searching for him. Where would she look? It would be her style simply to walk the streets, smiling and striding, in the hope of their meeting. He had a premonition—and, yes, there, waiting to cross Forty-third Street between two Puerto Rican messenger boys, it was she, with her back toward him; there was no mistaking the expectant tilt of her head, the girlish curve of her high, taut cheek, the massed roll of hair pulled so glossy he used to imagine that the hairpins gave her pain. He drew abreast, timid and prankish, to surprise her profile, and she became a wrinkled painted woman with a sagging lower lip. He glanced around incredulously, and her stare glimmered and disappeared in the wavering wall-window of a modernistic bank. Crossing the street, he looked into the bank, but there was no one, no one he knew—only some potted tropical plants that looked vaguely familiar.

He returned to work. His company had lent him for this visit the office of a man on vacation. He managed to concentrate only by imagining that each five minutes were the final segment of time he would have to himself before she arrived. When the phone on his desk rang, he expected the receptionist to announce that a distraught woman with striking eyes was asking for him. When he went into the halls, a secretary flickering out of sight battered his heart with a resemblance. He returned to his borrowed office, and was startled not to find her in it, wryly examining the yellowed children’s drawings—another man’s children—taped to the walls. The bored afternoon pasted shadows on these walls. Outside his window, the skyscrapers began to glow. He went down the elevator and into the cool, crowded dusk thankful for her consideration; it was like her to let him finish his day’s work before she declared her presence. But now, now she could cease considerately hiding, and he could take her to dinner with a clear conscience. He checked his wallet to make sure he had enough money. He decided he would refuse to take her to a play, though undoubtedly she would suggest it. She loved the theatre’s mock fuss. But they had too little time together to waste it in awareness of a third thing.

He had taken a room at what he still thought of as their hotel. To his surprise, she was not waiting for him in the lobby, which seemed filled with a party, a competition of laughter. Charles Boyer, one eyebrow arched, was waiting for the elevator. She would have liked that, that celebrity visitation, as she sat on the bench near the desk, waiting and watching, her long legs crossed and one black shoe jabbing the air with its heel and toe. He had even prepared his explanation to the clerk: This was his wife. They had had (voice lowered, the unavoidable blush not, after all, inappropriate) a fight, and impulsively she had followed him to New York, to make up. Irregular, but … women. So could his single reservation kindly be changed to a double? Thank you.

This little play was so firmly written in his head that he looked into the bar to make sure the leading actress was not somewhere in the wings. The bar was bluely lit and amply patronized by fairies. Their drawled, elaborately enunciating voices, discussing musical comedies in tones of peculiar passion, carried to him, and he remembered how she, when he had expressed distaste, had solemnly explained to him that homosexuals were people, too, and how she herself often felt attracted to them, and how it always saddened her that she had nothing, you know—her stare defensively sharpened—to give them. “That old bag, she’s overex*posed* herself,” one of the fairies stridently declared, of a famous actress.

He took the elevator up to his room. It was similar to ones they had shared, but nothing was exactly the same, except the plumbing fixtures, and even these were differently arranged. He changed his shirt and necktie. In the mirror, behind him, a slow curve of movement, like a woman’s inquisitive step, chilled his spine; it was the closet door drifting shut.

He rushed from the suffocating vacant room into the streets, to inhale the invisible possibility of finding her. He ate at the restaurant he would have chosen for them both. The waiter seemed fussed, seating a solitary man. The woman of a couple at a nearby table adjusted an earring with a gesture that belonged to her; she had never had her ears pierced, and this naïveté of her flesh had charmed him. He abstained from coffee. Tonight he must court sleep assiduously.

He walked to tire himself. Broadway was garish with the clash of mating—sailors and sweethearts, touts and tarts. Spring infiltrates a city through the blood of its inhabitants. The side streets were hushed like the aisles of long Pullman sleepers being drawn forward by their diminishing perspective. She would look for him on Fifth Avenue; her window-shopper’s instinct would send her there. He saw her silhouette at a distance, near Rockefeller Center, and up close he spotted a certain momentary plane of her face that flew away in a flash, leaving behind the rubble of a face he did not know, had never kissed or tranquilly studied as it lay averted on a pillow. Once or twice, he even glimpsed, shadowed in a doorway, huddled on a bench tipping down toward the Promethean fountain, the ghostly child of their tenderness, asleep; but never her, her in the fragrant solidity he had valued with such a strange gay lightness when it was upon him. Statistically, it began to seem wonderful that out of so many faces not one was hers. It seemed only reasonable that he could skim, like interest, her presence from a sufficient quantity of strangers—that he could refine her, like radium, out of enough pitchblende. She had never been reserved with him; this terrible tact of absence was unlike her.

The moon gratuitously added its stolen glow to the harsh illumination around the iceless skating rink. As if sensing his search, faces turned as he passed. Each successive instant shocked him by being empty of her; he knew so fully how this meeting would go. Her eyes would light on him, and her mouth would involuntarily break into the grin that greeted all her occasions, however grave and dangerous; her stare would pull her body forward, and the gathering nearness of his presence would dissolve away the hardness, the controlled coldness, the—what? What was that element that had been there from the beginning and that, in the end, despite every strenuous motion of his heart, he had intensified, like some wild vague prophecy given a tyrannical authority in its fulfillment? What was the thing he had never named, perhaps because his vanity refused to believe that it could both attach to him and exist before him?

He wondered if he were tired enough now. There was an ache in his legs that augured well. He walked back to the hotel. The air of celebration had left the lobby. No celebrity was in sight. A few well-dressed young women, of the style that bloom and wither by thousands in the city’s public spaces, were standing waiting for an escort or an elevator. As he pressed, no doubt redundantly, the button, a face cut into the side of his vision at such an angle that his head snapped around and he almost said aloud, “Don’t be frightened. Of course I love you.”