# The Taste of Metal

# John Updike

METAL, STRICTLY, HAS no taste; its presence in the mouth is felt as disciplinary, as a *No* spoken to other tastes. When Richard Maple, after many years of twinges, jagged edges, and occasional extractions, had all his remaining molars capped and bridges shaped across the gaps, the gold felt chilly to his cheeks and its regularity masked holes and roughnesses that had been a kind of mirror wherein his tongue had known itself. The Friday of the final cementing, he went to a small party. As he drank a variety of liquids that tasted much the same, he moved from feeling slightly less than himself (his native teeth had been ground to stumps of dentine) to feeling slightly more. The shift in tonality that permeated his skull whenever his jaws closed corresponded, perhaps, to the heightened clarity that fills the mind after a religious conversion. He saw his companions at the party with a new brilliance — a sharpness of vision that, like a cameras, was specific and restricted in focus. He could see only one person at a time, and found himself focusing less on his wife, Joan, than on Eleanor Dennis, the long-legged wife of a municipal-bond broker.

Eleanor’s distinctness in part had to do with the legal fact that she and her husband were ‘separated.’ It had happened recently; his absence from the party was noticeable. Eleanor, in the course of a life that she described as a series of harrowing survivals, had developed the brassy social manner that converts private catastrophe into public humorousness; but tonight her agitation was imperfectly converted. She listened for an echo that wasn’t there, and twitchily crossed and recrossed her legs. Her legs were handsome and vivid and so long that, after midnight, when parlor games began, she hitched up her brief shirt and kicked the lintel of a doorframe. The host balanced a glass of water on his forehead. Richard, demonstrating a headstand, mistakenly tumbled forward, delighted at his inebriated softness, which felt to be an ironical comment upon flesh that his new metal teeth were making. He was all mortality; all porous erosion save for these stars in his head, an impervious polar cluster at the zenith of his slow whirling.

His wife came to him with a face as unscarred and chastening as the face of a clock. It was time to go home. And Eleanor needed a ride. The three of them, plus the hostess in her bangle earrings and coffee-stained culottes, went to the door, and discovered a snowstorm. As far as the eye could probe, flakes were falling in a jostling crowd through the whispering lavender night. ‘God bless us, every one,’ Richard said.

The hostess suggested that Joan should drive.

Richard kissed her on the cheek and tasted the metal of her bangle earring and got in behind the wheel. His car was a brand-new Corvair; he wouldn’t dream of trusting anyone else to drive it. Joan crawled into the back seat, grunting to emphasize the physical awkwardness, and Eleanor serenely arranged her coat and pocketbook and legs in the space beside him. The motor sprang alive. Richard felt resiliently cushioned: Eleanor was beside him, Joan behind him, God above him, the road beneath him. The fast-falling snow dipped brilliant — explosive, chrysanthemumesque — into the car headlights. On a small hill the tires spun — a loose, reassuring noise, like the slither of a raincoat.

In the knobbed darkness lit by the green speed gauge, Eleanor, showing a wealth of knee, talked at length of her separated husband. ‘You have no *idea*,’ she said, ‘you two are so sheltered you have no idea what men are capable of. I didn’t know myself. I don’t mean to sound ungracious, he gave me nine reasonable years and I wouldn’t *dream* of punishing him with the children’s visiting hours the way some women would, but that *man*! You know what he had the crust to tell me? He actually told me that when he was with another woman he’d sometimes close his eyes and pretend it was *me*.’

‘Sometimes,’ Richard said.

His wife behind him said, ‘Darley, are you aware that the road is slippery?’

‘That’s the shine of the headlights,’ he told her.

Eleanor crossed and recrossed her legs. Half the length of a thigh flared in the intimate green glow. She went on, ‘And his *trips*. I wondered why the same city was always putting out bond issues. I began to feel sorry for the mayor, I thought they were going bankrupt. Looking back at myself, I was so *good*, so wrapped up in the children and the house, always on the phone to the contractor or the plumber or the gas company trying to get the new kitchen done in time for Thanksgiving, when his silly, *silly* mother was coming to visit. About once a day I’d sharpen the carving knife. Thank God that phase of my life is over. I went to his mother — for sympathy, I suppose — and very indignantly she asked me, what had I done to her boy? The children and I had tunafish sandwiches by ourselves and it was the first Thanksgiving I’ve ever enjoyed, frankly.’

‘I always have trouble,’ Richard told her, ‘finding the second joint.’

Joan said, ‘Darley, you know you’re coming to that terrible curve?’

‘You should see my father-in-law carve. Snick, snap, snap, snick. Your blood runs cold.’

‘On my birthday, my *birthday*,’ Eleanor said, accidentally kicking the heater, ‘the bastard was with his little dolly in a restaurant, and he told me, he solemnly told me — men are incredible — he told me he ordered cake for dessert. That was his tribute to me. The night he confessed all this, it was the end of the world, but I had to laugh. I asked him if he’d had the restaurant put a candle on the cake. He told me he’d thought of it but hadn’t had the guts.’

Richard’s responsive laugh was held in suspense as the car skidded on the curve. A dark upright shape had appeared in the center of the windshield, and he tried to remove it, but the automobile proved impervious to the steering wheel and instead drew closer, as if magnetized, to a telephone pole that rigidly insisted on its position in the center of the windshield. The pole enlarged. The little splinters pricked by the linemen’s cleats leaped forward in the headlights, and there was a flat whack surprisingly unambiguous, considering how casually it had happened. Richard felt the sudden refusal of motion, the *No*, and knew, though his mind was deeply cushioned in a cottony indifference, that an event had occurred which in another incarnation he would regret.

‘You jerk,’ Joan said. Her voice was against his ear. ‘Your pretty new car.’ She asked, ‘Eleanor, are you all right?’ With a rising inflection she repeated, ‘Are you all right?’ It sounded like scolding.

Eleanor giggled softly, embarrassed. ‘I’m fine,’ she said, ‘except that I can’t seem to move my legs.’ The windshield near her head had become a web of light, an exploded star.

Either the radio had been on or had turned itself on, for mellow, meditating music flowed from a realm behind time. Richard identified it as one of Handel’s oboe sonatas. He noticed that his knees distantly hurt. Eleanor had slid forward and seemed unable to uncross her legs. Shockingly, she whimpered. Joan asked, ‘Sweetheart, didn’t you know you were going too fast?’

‘I am very stupid,’ he said. Music and snow poured down upon them, and he imagined that, if only the oboe sonata were played backwards, they would leap backwards from the telephone pole and be on their way home again. The little distances to their houses, once measured in minutes, had frozen and become immense, like those in galaxies.

Using her hands, Eleanor uncrossed her legs and brought herself upright in her seat. She lit a cigarette. Richard, his knees creaking, got out of the car and tried to push it free. He told Joan to come out of the back seat and get behind the wheel. Their motions were clumsy, wriggling in and out of darkness. The headlights still burned, but the beams were bent inward, toward each other. The Corvair had a hollow head, its engine being in the rear. Its face, an unimpassioned insect’s face, was inextricably curved around the pole; the bumper had become locked mandibles. When Richard pushed and Joan fed gas, the wheels whined in a vacuum. The smooth encircling night extended around them, above and beyond the snow. No window light had acknowledged their accident.

Joan, who had a social conscience, asked, ‘Why doesn’t anybody come out and help us?’

Eleanor, the voice of bitter experience, answered, ‘This pole is hit so often it’s just a nuisance to the neighborhood.’

Richard announced, ‘I’m too drunk to face the police.’ The remark hung with a neon clarity in the night.

A car came by, slowed, stopped. A window rolled down and revealed a frightened male voice. ‘Everything O.K.?’

‘Not entirely,’ Richard said. He was pleased by his powers, under stress, of exact expression.

‘I can take somebody to a telephone. I’m on my way back from a poker game.’

A lie, Richard reasoned — otherwise, why advance it? The boy’s face had the blurred pallor of the sexually drained. Taking care to give each word weight, Richard told him, ‘One of us can’t move and I better stay with her. If you could take my wife to a phone, we’d all be most grateful.’

‘Who do I call?’ Joan asked.

Richard hesitated between the party they had left, their baby-sitter at home, and Eleanor’s husband, who was living in a motel on Route 128.

The boy answered for him: ‘The police.’

Joan got into the stranger’s car, a rusty red Mercury. The car faded through the snow, which was slackening. The storm had been just a flurry, an illusion conjured to administer this one rebuke. It wouldn’t even make tomorrow’s newspapers.

Richard’s knees felt as if icicles were being pressed against the soft spot beneath the caps, where the doctor’s hammer searches for a reflex. He got in behind the wheel again, and switched off the lights. He switched off the ignition. Eleanor’s cigarette glowed. Though his system was still adrift in liquor, he could not quite forget the taste of metal in his teeth. That utterly flat *No:* through several dreamlike thicknesses something very hard had touched him. Once, swimming in surf, he had been sucked under by a large wave. Tons of sudden surge had enclosed him and, with an implacable downward shrug, thrust him deep into dense green bitterness and stripped him of weight; his struggling became nothing, he was nothing within the wave. There had been no hatred. The wave simply hadn’t *cared*.

He tried to apologize to the woman beside him in the darkness.

She said, ‘Oh, please. I’m sure nothing’s broken. At the worst I’ll be on crutches for a few days.’ She laughed and added, ‘This just isn’t my year.’

‘Does it hurt?’

‘No, not at all.’

‘You’re probably in shock. You’ll be cold. I’ll get the heat back.’ Richard was sobering, and an infinite drabness was dawning for him. Never again, never ever, would his car be new, would he chew on his own enamel, would she kick so high with her fine long legs. He turned the ignition back on and started up the motor, for warmth. The radio softly returned, still Handel.

Moving from the hips up with surprising strength, Eleanor turned and embraced him. Her cheeks were wet; her lipstick tasted manufactured. Searching for her waist, for the smallness of her breasts, he fumbled through thicknesses of cloth. They were still in each other’s arms when the whirling blue light of the police car broke upon them.