# Avec la Bébé-Sitter

# John Updike

EVERYBODY, from their friends in Boston to the stewards on the boat, wondered why Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Harris should suddenly uproot their family of three young children and take them to the South of France in the middle of November. They had no special affection or aptitude for the country. Janet Harris knew French as well as anyone who had taken six years of it in various respectable schools without ever speaking to a Frenchman, but Kenneth himself knew hardly any—indeed, he was not, despite a certain surface knowingness, an educated person at all. The magazine illustrations, poised somewhere between the ardently detailed earth of Norman Rockwell and the breezy blue clouds of Jon Whitcomb, with which Kenneth earned his considerable living were the outcome of a rather monomaniacal and cloistered apprenticeship. At his drawing board, in the spattered little room papered with graphic art, he was a kind of master, inventive and conscientious and mysteriously alert to the oscillations of chic that twitched the New York market; outside this room he was impulsive and innocent and unduly dependent upon improvisation. It was typical of him to disembark in Cannes with three exhausted, confused children (one still in diapers) and a harried, hurt-looking wife, without a villa, a car, or a single friendly face to greet them, at a time of year when the Mediterranean sunshine merely underlined the actual chill in the air. After a week spent in a deserted hotel whose solicitous Old World personnel, apparently all members of a single whispering family, were charging him ninety dollars a day, he blundered into an Antibes villa that, if it was not equal in conveniences or in floor space to their Marlborough Street brownstone, at least had enough beds and a postcard view of Fort Carré and the (on fair days) turquoise harbor beyond. It was two more weeks, while Janet wrestled alone with the housekeeping and shopping, before they acquired a badly needed baby-sitter. It was not only that Kenneth was incompetent; he was, like many people whose living comes to them with some agency of luck, a miser. The expense of this trip fairly paralyzed him, and, in truth, the even greater expense of the divorce to which it was the alternative was, among the decisive factors, not the least decisive.

The baby-sitter—their English-French dictionary gave no equivalent, and *bébé-sitter*, as a joke, was funnier than *une qui s’assied avec les bébés*—was named, easily enough, Marie, and was a short, healthy widow of about forty who each noon when she arrived would call “*Bonjour*, *monsieur!*” to Kenneth with a gay, hopeful ring that seemed to promise ripe new worlds of communication between them. She spoke patiently and distinctly, and in a few days had received from Janet an adequate image of their expectations and had communicated in turn such intricate pieces of information as that her husband had died suddenly of a heart attack (“*Cœur—bom!*”—her arm quickly striking from the horizontal into the vertical) and that the owners and summer residents of their villa were a pair of homosexuals (hands fluttering at her shoulders—“*Pas de femmes. Jamais de femmes!*”) who hired boys from Nice and Cannes for “*dix mille pour une nuit*.” “*Nouveaux francs?*” Kenneth asked, and she laughed delightedly, saying, “*Oui, oui*,” though this couldn’t be right; no boy was worth two thousand dollars a night. Marie was tantalizing, for he felt within her, as in a locked chest, inaccessible wealth, and he didn’t feel that Janet, who was stiffly fearful, in conversing with her, of making a grammatical mistake, was gaining access either. As a result, the children remained hostile and frightened. They were accustomed, in Boston, to two types of baby-sitters: teen-age girls, upon whom his elder daughter, aged seven, inflicted a succession of giggling crushes, and elderly limping women, of whom the grandest was Mrs. Shea. She had a bosom like a bolster and a wispy saintly voice in which, apparently, as soon as the Harrises were gone, she would tell the children wonderful stories of disease, calamity, and anatomical malfunction. Marie was neither young nor old, and, hermetically sealed inside her language, she must have seemed to the children as grotesque as a fish mouthing behind glass. They clustered defiantly around their parents, routing Janet out of her nap, pursuing Kenneth into the field where he had gone to sketch, leaving Marie alone in the kitchen, whose floor she repeatedly mopped in an embarrassed effort to make herself useful. And whenever their parents left together, the children, led by the oldest, wailed shamelessly while poor Marie tried to rally them with energetic “*ooh*”s and “*ah*”s. It was a humiliating situation for everyone, and Kenneth was vexed by the belief that his wife, in an hour of undivided attention, could easily have built between the baby-sitter and the children a few word bridges that would have adequately carried all this stalled emotional traffic. But she, with the stubborn shyness that was alternately her most frustrating and most appealing trait, refused, or was unable, to do this. She was exhausted. One afternoon, after they had done a little shopping for the Christmas that in this country and climate seemed so wan a holiday, Kenneth had dropped her off at the Musée d’Antibes and drove back in their rented Renault to the villa alone.

Smoke filled the living room. The children and Marie were gathered in silence around a fire she had built in the fireplace. Her eyes looked inquisitively past him when he entered. “*Madame*,” he explained, “*est*, uh, *visitée?—la musée*.”

Comprehension dawned in her quick face. “*Ah, le Musée d’Antibes! Très joli*.”

“*Oui*. Uh”—he thought he should explain this, so she would not expect him to leave in the car again*—*“*madame est marchée*.” In case this was the wrong word, he made walking motions with his fingers, and, unable to locate any equivalent for “back,” added, “*ici*.”

Marie nodded eagerly. “*À pied*.”

“I guess. Yes. *Oui*.”

Then came several rapid sentences that he did not understand at all. She repeated slowly, “*Monsieur*,” pointing at him, “*travaille*,” scribbling with her hands across an imaginary sketchbook.

“Oh. *Oui. Bon. Merci. Et les enfants?*”

From her flurry of words and gestures he gathered an assurance that she would take care of them. But when he did go outdoors with the pad and paintbox, all three, led by Vera, the two-year-old, irresistibly followed, deaf to Marie’s shrill pleas. Flustered, embarrassed, she came onto the patio.

“*C’est rien*,” he told her, and wanted to tell her, “Don’t worry.” He tried to put this into his facial expression, and she laughed, shrugged, and went back into the house. Fort Carré was taking the sun on one chalk-yellow side in the cubistic way that happens only in French light, and the Mediterranean wore a curious double horizon of hazed blue, and Nice in the distance was like a long heap of pale flakes shed by the starkly brilliant Alps beyond. But Vera accidentally kicked the glass of water into the open paint tray, and as he bent to pick it up the freshly wet sketch fell face down into the grass. He gathered up everything and returned to the house, the children following. Marie was in the kitchen mopping the floor. “I think we should have a French lesson,” he announced firmly. To Marie he added, with an apologetic note of interrogation, “*Leçon français?*”

“*Une leçon de français*,” she said, and they all went into the smoky living room. “*Fumée—foof!*” she exclaimed, waving her hands in front of her face and opening the side doors. Then she sat down on the bamboo sofa with orange cushions—the two homosexuals had a taste for highly colored, flimsy furniture—and crossed her hands expectantly in her lap.

“Now,” Kenneth said. “*Maintenant. Comment dites-vous—?*” He held up a pencil.

“*Le crayon*,” Marie said.

“*Le crayon*,” Kenneth repeated proudly. How simple, really, it all was. “Nancy, say *‘le crayon.’* ”

The girl giggled and shuttled her eyes between the two adults, to make sure they were serious. “Luh crrayong,” she said.

“*Bon*,” Kenneth said. “Charlie. *‘Le crayon.’* ”

The boy was four, and his intelligence had a way of unpredictably sinking beneath waves of infantile willfulness. But, after a moment’s hesitation, he brought out “*Le crayon*” with an expert twang.

“And Vera? *‘Le crayon*’?”

The baby was just learning English, and he did not press her when she looked startled and said nothing. The lesson continued, through *le feu, le bois, la cheminée*, and *le canapé orange*. Having exhausted the objects immediately before them, Kenneth drew, and Marie identified, such basic components of the universe as *l’homme, la femme, le garçon, la jeune fille, le chien, le chat, la maison*, and *les oiseaux*. The two older children took to bringing things from other parts of the room*—un livre, une bouteille d’encre, un cendrier*, and an old *soulier* of Charlie’s whose mate had mysteriously vanished out in the yard among the giant cactuses. Nancy fetched from her room three paper dolls of great men she had punched from a copy of *Réalités* left in the house. “*Ah*,” Marie said. “*Jules César, Napoléon, et Charles Baudelaire*.”

Vera toddled into the kitchen and came back with a stale cupcake, which she held out hopefully, her little face radiant.

“*Gâteau*,” Marie said.

“Coogie,” Vera said.

“*Gâteau*.”

“Coogie.”

“*Non, non. Gâteau*.”

“*Coogie!*”

“*Gâteau!*”

The baby burst into tears. Kenneth picked her up and said, “You’re right, Vera. That’s a cookie.” To the other children he said, “O.K., kids. That’s all for now. Tomorrow we’ll have another lesson. Go outside and play.” He set the baby down. With a frightened backward look at the baby-sitter, Vera followed her brother and sister outdoors. By way of patching things up, Kenneth felt he should stay with Marie and make conversation. Both remained sitting. He wondered how much longer it would be before Janet returned and rescued them. The unaccustomed sensation of yearning for his wife made him feel itchy and suffocated.

“*Le français*,” Marie said, spacing her words clearly, “*est difficile pour vous*.”

“*Je suis très stupide*,” he said.

“*Mais non, non, monsieur est très doué, très*”—her hand scribbled over an imaginary sketch pad*—*“*adroit*.”

Kenneth winced modestly, unable to frame any disclaimer.

She directed at him an interrogative sentence which, though she repeated it slowly, with various indications of her hands, he could not understand. “Nyew Yurrk?” she said at last. “Weshing*ton?*”

“Oh. Where do I come from? Here. *Les États-Unis*.” He took up the pad again, turned a new leaf, and drew the Eastern Seaboard. “*Floride*,” he said as he outlined the peninsula and, growing reckless, indicated “*Le Golfe de Mexique*.” He suspected from her blank face that this was wrong. He put in a few dark dots: “Washington, New York, *et ici, une heure nord à* New York *par avion,* Bos*ton! Grande ville*.”

*“Ah,”* Marie said.

“We live,” Kenneth went on, “uh, *nous vivons dans une maison comme ça*.” And he found himself drawing, in avidly remembered detail, the front of their house on Marlborough Street, the flight of brown steps with the extra-tall top step, the carpet-sized front lawn with its wrought-iron fence and its single prisoner of forsythia like a weeping princess, the coarse old English ivy that winter never quite killed, the tall bay windows with their transom lights of Tiffany glass; he even put the children’s faces in the second-story windows. This was the window of Vera’s room, these were the ones that Nancy and Charlie watched the traffic out of, this was the living-room window that at this time of year should show a brightly burdened Christmas tree, and up here, on the third story, were the little shuttered windows of the guest bedroom that was inhabited by a ghost with a slender throat, sleek hair, and naked moonlit shoulders. Emotion froze his hand.

Marie, looking up from the vivid drawing with very dark eyes, asked a long question in which he seemed to hear the words *“France”* and *“pourquoi.”*

“Why did we come to France?” he asked her in English. She nodded. He said what he next said in part, no doubt, because it was the truth, but mainly, probably, because he happened to know the words. He put his hand over his heart and told the baby-sitter, *“J’aime une autre femme.”*

Marie’s shapely plucked eyebrows lifted, and he wondered if he had made sense. The sentence seemed foolproof; but he did not repeat it. Locked in linguistic darkness, he had thrown open the most tightly closed window of his life. He felt the relief, the loss of constriction, of a man who has let in air.

Marie spoke very carefully. *“Et madame? Vous ne l’aimez pas?”*

There was a phrase, Kenneth knew, something like *“Comme ci, comme ça,”* which might roughly outline the immense ambiguous mass of his guilty, impatient, fond, and forlorn feelings toward Janet. But he didn’t dare it, and instead, determined to be precise, measured off about an inch and a half with his fingers and said, *“Un petit peu pas.”*

*“Ahhhh.”* And now Marie, as if the languages had been reversed, was speechless. Various American phrases traditional to his situation—“a chance to get over it,” “for the sake of the kids”—revolved in Kenneth’s head without encountering any equivalent French. *“Pour les enfants,”* he said at last, gesturing toward the outdoors and abruptly following the direction of his gesture, for Vera had begun to cry in the distance. About twice a day she speared herself on one of the cactuses.

Janet was walking up the driveway. As he saw her go in to the baby-sitter he felt only a slight alarm. It didn’t seem possible that he could have been indiscreet in a language he didn’t know. When he came indoors, Marie and his wife were talking at cheerful length about what he gathered to be the charm of Le Musée d’Antibes, and it occurred to him that the reserve that had existed between the two women had been as much the baby-sitter’s as Janet’s. Now, from this afternoon on, Marie became voluble and jolly, open and *intime*, with her mistress; the two held long kitchen conversations in which womanly intuition replaced whatever was lost in nuances of grammar. The children, feeling the new *rapprochement*, ceased yowling when their parents went away together, and under Marie’s care developed a somewhat independent French, in which, if pencils were called crayons, crayons must be called pencils. Vera learned the word *gâteau* and the useful sentence *“Je voudrais un gâteau.”* As to Kenneth, he was confident, without knowing what the women said to each other, that his strange confession was never mentioned. The *bébé-sitter* kept between herself and him a noticeable distance, whether as a sign of disapproval or of respect, he could not decide; at any rate, when she was in the house he was encouraged to paint by himself in the fields, and this isolation, wherein his wife’s growing fluency spared him much further trouble of communication, suited his preoccupied heart. In short, they became a *ménage*.