# Your Lover Just Called

# John Updike

THE TELEPHONE RANG, and Richard Maple, who had stayed home from work this Friday because of a cold, answered it: ‘Hello?’ The person at the other end of the line hung up. Richard went into the bedroom, where Joan was making the bed, and said, ‘Your lover just called.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Nothing. He hung up. He was amazed to find me home.’

‘Maybe it was *your* lover.’

He knew, through the phlegm beclouding his head, that there was something wrong with this, and found it. ‘If it was *my* lover,’ he said, ‘why would she hang up, since I answered?’

Joan shook the sheet so it made a clapping noise. ‘Maybe she doesn’t love you any more.’

‘This is a ridiculous conversation.’

‘You started it.’

‘Well, what would you think, if you answered the phone on a weekday and the person hung up? He clearly expected you to be home alone.’

‘Well, if you’ll get under these covers I’ll call him back and explain the situation.’

*‘You* think *I’ll* think you’re kidding but I know that’s really what *would* happen.’

‘Oh, come on, Dick. Who would it be? Freddie Vetter?’

‘Or Harry Saxon. Or somebody I don’t know at all. Some old college friend who’s moved to New England. Or maybe the milkman. I can hear you and him talking while I’m shaving sometimes.’

‘We’re surrounded by hungry children. He’s fifty years old and has hair coming out of his ears.’

‘Like your father. You’re not averse to older men. There was that humanities section man when we first met. Anyway, you’ve been acting awfully happy lately. There’s a little smile comes into your face when you’re doing the housework. See, there it is!’

‘I’m smiling,’ Joan said, ‘because you’re so absurd. I have no lover. I have nowhere to put him. My days are consumed by devotion to the needs of my husband and his many children.’

‘Oh, so I’m the one who made you have all the children? While you were hankering after a career in fashion or in the exciting world of business. Aeronautics, perhaps. You could have been the first woman to design a nose cone. Or to crack the wheat-futures cycle. Joan Maple, girl agronomist. Joan Maple, lady geopolitician. But for that fornicating brute she mistakenly married, this clear-eyed female citizen of our ever-needful republic —’

‘Dick, have you taken your temperature? I haven’t heard you rave like this for years.’

‘I haven’t been betrayed like this for years. I hated that *click*. That nasty little I-know-your-wife-better-than-you-do *click*.’

‘It was some child. If we’re going to have Mack for dinner tonight, you better convalesce now.’

‘It *is* Mack, isn’t it? That son of a bitch. The divorce isn’t even finalized and he’s calling my wife on the phone. And then proposes to gorge himself at my groaning board.’

‘I’ll be groaning myself. You’re giving me a headache.’

‘Sure. First I foist off children on you in my mad desire for progeny, then I give you a menstrual headache.’

‘Get into bed and I’ll bring you orange juice and toast cut into strips the way your mother used to make it.’

‘You’re lovely’

As he was settling himself under the blankets, the phone rang again, and Joan answered it in the upstairs hall. ‘Yes … no … no … good,’ she said, and hung up.

‘Who was it?’ he called.

‘Somebody wanting to sell us the *World Book Encyclopedia,’* she called back.

A very likely story’ he said, with self-pleasing irony leaning back onto the pillows confident that he was being unjust, that there was no lover.

Mack Dennis was a homely, agreeable, sheepish man their age, whose wife, Eleanor, was in Wyoming suing for divorce. He spoke of her with a cloying tenderness, as if of a favorite daughter away for the first time at camp, or as a departed angel nevertheless keeping in close touch with the abandoned earth. ‘She says they’ve had some wonderful thunderstorms. The children go horseback riding every morning, and they play Pounce at night and are in bed by ten. Everybody’s health has never been better. Ellie’s asthma has cleared up and she thinks now she must have been allergic to *me.’*

‘You should have cut all your hair off and dressed in cellophane,’ Richard told him.

Joan asked him, ‘And how’s *your* health? Are you feeding yourself enough? Mack, you look thin.’

‘The nights I don’t stay in Boston,’ Mack said, tapping himself all over for a pack of cigarettes, ‘I’ve taken to eating at the motel on Route 33. It’s the best food in town now, and you can watch the kids in the swimming pool.’ He studied his empty upturned hands as if they had recently held a surprise. He missed his own kids, was perhaps the surprise.

‘I’m out of cigarettes too,’ Joan said.

‘I’ll go get some,’ Richard said.

‘And a thing of club soda if they have it.’

‘I’ll make a pitcher of martinis,’ Mack said. ‘Doesn’t it feel great, to have martini weather again?’

It was that season which is late summer in the days and early autumn at night. Evening descended on the downtown, lifting the neon tubing into brilliance, as Richard ran his errand. His sore throat felt folded within him like a secret; there was something reckless and gay in his being up and out at all after spending the afternoon in bed. Home, he parked by his back fence and walked down through a lawn rustling with fallen leaves, though the trees overhead were still massy. The lit windows of his house looked golden and idyllic; the children’s rooms were above (the face of Judith, his bigger daughter, drifted preoccupied across a slice of her wallpaper, and her pink square hand reached to adjust a doll on a shelf) and the kitchen below. In the kitchen windows, whose tone was fluorescent, a silent tableau was being enacted. Mack was holding a martini shaker and pouring it into a vessel, eclipsed by an element of window sash, that Joan was offering with a long white arm. Head tilted winningly, she was talking with the slightly pushed-forward mouth that Richard recognized as peculiar to her while looking into mirrors, conversing with her elders, or otherwise seeking to display herself to advantage. Whatever she was saying made Mack laugh, so that his pouring (the silver shaker head glinted, a drop of greenish liquid spilled) was unsteady. He set the shaker down and displayed his hands — the same hands from which a little while ago a surprise had seemed to escape — at his sides, shoulder-high.

Joan moved toward him, still holding her glass, and the back of her head, done up taut and oval in a bun, with downy hairs trailing at the nape of her neck, eclipsed all of Mack’s face but his eyes, which closed. They were kissing. Joan’s head tilted one way and Mack’s another to make their mouths meet tighter. The graceful line of her shoulders was carried outward by the line of the arm holding her glass safe in the air. The other arm was around his neck. Behind them an open cabinet door revealed a paralyzed row of erect paper boxes whose lettering Richard could not read but whose coloring advertised their contents — Cheerios, Wheat Honeys, Onion Thins. Joan backed off and ran her index finger down the length of Mack’s necktie (a summer tartan), ending with a jab in the vicinity of his navel that might have expressed a rebuke or a regret. His face, pale and lumpy in the harsh vertical light, looked mildly humorous but intent, and moved forward, toward hers, an inch or two. The scene had the fascinating slow motion of action underwater, mixed with the insane silent suddenness of a television montage glimpsed from the street. Judith came to the window upstairs, not noticing her father standing in the shadow of the tree. Wearing a nightie of lemon gauze, she innocently scratched her armpit while studying a moth beating on her screen; and this too gave Richard a momentous sense, crowding his heart, of having been brought by the mute act of witnessing — like a child sitting alone at the movies — perilously close to the hidden machinations of things. In another kitchen window a neglected teakettle began to plume and to fog the panes with steam. Joan was talking again; her forward-thrust lips seemed to be throwing rapid little bridges across a narrowing gap. Mack paused, shrugged; his face puckered as if he were speaking French. Joan’s head snapped back with laughter and triumphantly she threw her free arm wide and was in his embrace again. His hand, spread starlike on the small of her back, went lower to what, out of sight behind the edge of Formica counter, would be her bottom.

Richard scuffled loudly down the cement steps and kicked the kitchen door open, giving them time to break apart before he entered. From the far end of the kitchen, smaller than children, they looked at him with blurred, blank expressions. Joan turned off the steaming kettle and Mack shambled forward to pay for the cigarettes. After the third round of martinis, the constraints loosened and Richard said, taking pleasure in the plaintive huskiness of his voice, ‘Imagine my discomfort. Sick as I am, I go out into this bitter night to get my wife and my guest some cigarettes, so they can pollute the air and aggravate my already grievous bronchial condition, and, coming down through the back yard, what do I see? The two of them doing the Kama Sutra in my own kitchen. It was like seeing a blue movie and knowing the people in it.’

‘Where do you see blue movies nowadays?’ Joan asked.

‘Tush, Dick,’ Mack said sheepishly, rubbing his thighs with a brisk ironing motion. ‘A mere fraternal kiss. A brotherly hug. A disinterested tribute to your wife’s charm.’

‘Really, Dick,’ Joan said. ‘I think it’s shockingly sneaky of you to be standing around spying into your own windows.’

‘Standing around! I was transfixed with horror. It was a real trauma. My first primal scene.’ A profound happiness was stretching him from within; the reach of his tongue and wit felt immense, and the other two seemed dolls, homunculi, in his playful grasp.

‘We were hardly doing anything,’ Joan said, lifting her head as if to rise above it all, the lovely line of her jaw defined by tension, her lips stung by a pout.

‘Oh, I’m sure, by your standards, you had hardly begun. You’d hardly sampled the possible wealth of coital positions. Did you think I’d never return? Have you poisoned my drink and I’m too vigorous to die, like Rasputin?’

‘Dick,’ Mack said; ‘Joan loves you. And if I love any man, it’s you. Joan and I had this out years ago, and decided to be merely friends.’

‘Don’t go Gaelic on me, Mack Dennis. “If I love any mon, ‘tis thee.” Don’t give me a thought, laddie. Just think of poor Eleanor out there, sweating out your divorce, bouncing up and down on those horses day after day, playing Pounce till she’s black and blue —’

‘Let’s eat,’ Joan said. ‘You’ve made me so nervous I’ve probably overdone the roast beef. Really, Dick, I don’t think you can excuse yourself by trying to make it funny.’

Next day, the Maples awoke soured and dazed by hangovers; Mack had stayed until two, to make sure there were no hard feelings. Joan usually played ladies’ tennis Saturday mornings, while Richard amused the children; now, dressed in white shorts and sneakers, she delayed at home in order to quarrel. ‘It’s desperate of you,’ she told Richard, ‘to try to make something of Mack and me. What are you trying to cover up?’

‘My dear Mrs Maple, I *saw*,’ he said, ‘I *saw* through my own windows you doing a very credible impersonation of a female spider having her abdomen tickled. Where did you learn to flirt your head like that? It was better than finger puppets.’

‘Mack always kisses me in the kitchen. It’s a habit, it means nothing. You know for yourself how in love with Eleanor he is.’

‘So much he’s divorcing her. His devotion verges on the quixotic.’

‘The divorce is her idea, obviously. He’s a lost soul. I feel sorry for him.’

‘Yes, I saw that you do. You were like the Red Cross at Verdun.’

‘What I’d like to know is, why are you so pleased?’

‘Pleased? I’m annihilated.’

‘You’re delighted. Look at your smile in the mirror.’

‘You’re so incredibly unapologetic, I guess I think you must be being ironical.’

The telephone rang. Joan picked it up and said, ‘Hello,’ and Richard heard the click across the room. Joan replaced the receiver and said to him, ‘So. She thought I’d be playing tennis by now.’

‘Who’s she?’

‘You tell me. Your lover. Your loveress.’

‘It was clearly yours, and something in your voice warned him off.’

‘Go to her!’ Joan suddenly cried, with a burst of the same defiant energy that made her, on other hungover mornings, rush through a mountain of housework. ‘Go to her like a man and stop trying to maneuver me into something I don’t understand! I have no lover! I let Mack kiss me because he’s lonely and drunk! Stop trying to make me more interesting than I am! All I am is a beat-up housewife who wants to go play tennis with some other exhausted ladies!’

Mutely Richard fetched from their sports closet her tennis racket, which had recently been restrung with gut. Carrying it in his mouth like a dog retrieving a stick, he got down on all fours and laid it at the toe of her sneaker. Richard Jr, their older son, a wiry nine-year-old presently obsessed by the accumulation of Batman cards, came into the living room, witnessed this pantomime, and laughed to hide his fright. ‘Dad, can I have my dime for emptying the wastebaskets?’

‘Mommy’s going to go out to play, Dickie,’ Richard said, licking from his lips the salty taste of the racket handle. ‘Let’s all go to the five-and-ten and buy a Batmobile.’

‘Yippee,’ the small boy said limply, glancing wide-eyed from one of his parents to the other, as if the space between them had gone treacherous.

Richard took the children to the five-and-ten, to the playground, and to a hamburger stand for lunch. These blameless activities transmuted the residue of alcohol and phlegm into a woolly fatigue as pure as the sleep of infants. His sore throat was fading. Obligingly he nodded while his son described an endless plot: ‘… and then, see, Dad, the Penguin had an umbrella smoke came out of, it was neat, and there were these two other guys with funny masks in the bank vault, filling it with water, I don’t know why, to make it bust or something, and Robin was climbing up these slippery stacks of like half-dollars to get away from the water, and then, see, Dad …’

Back home, the children dispersed into the neighborhood on the same mysterious tide that on other days packed their back yard with unfamiliar urchins. Joan returned from tennis glazed with sweat, her ankles coated with clay-court dust. Her body was swimming in the afterglow of exertion. He suggested they take a nap.

‘Just a nap,’ she warned.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I met my mistress at the playground and we satisfied each other on the jungle gym.’

‘Maureen and I beat Alice and Judy. It can’t be any of those three, they were waiting for me half an hour.’

In bed, the shades strangely drawn against the bright afternoon, and a glass of stale water standing bubbled with secret light, he asked her, ‘You think I want to make you more interesting than you are?’

‘Of course. You’re bored. You left me and Mack alone deliberately. It was very uncharacteristic of you, to go out with a cold.’

‘It’s sad, to think of you without a lover.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You’re pretty interesting anyway. Here, and here, and here.’

‘I said really a nap.’

In the upstairs hall, on the other side of the closed bedroom door, the telephone rang. After four peals — icy spears hurled from afar — the ringing stopped, unanswered. There was a puzzled pause. Then a tentative, questioning *pring*, as if someone in passing had bumped the table, followed by a determined series, strides of sound, imperative and plaintive, that did not stop until twelve had been counted; then the lover hung up.