# Waiting Up

# John Updike

AFTER 9:30, WHEN the last child, Judith, had been tucked into bed with a kiss that, now that she was twelve and as broad-faced as an adult, was frightening in the dark — the baby she had once been suspended at an immense height above the warm-mouthed woman she was becoming — Richard went downstairs and began to wait up for his wife. His mother had always waited up for him and for his father, keeping the house lit against their return from the basketball game, the swimming meet, the midnight adventure with the broken-down car. Entering the house on those nights, in from the cold, the boy had felt his mother as the dazzling center of a stationary, preferable world, and been jealous of her evening alone, in the warmth, with the radio. Now, taking up her old role, he made toast for himself, and drank a glass of milk, and flicked on television, and flicked it off, and poured some bourbon, and found his eyes unable to hold steady upon even a newspaper. He walked to the window and stared out at the street, where an elm not yet dead broke into nervous lace the light of a street lamp. Then he went into the kitchen and stared at the darkness of the back yard where, after a splash of headlights and the sob of a motor being cut, Joan would appear.

When the invitation came, they had agreed she might be out till eleven. But by 10:30 his heart was jarring, the bourbon began to go down as easily as water, and he discovered himself standing in a room with no memory of walking through the doorway. That Picasso plate chosen together in Vallauris. Those college anthologies mingled on the shelves. The battlefield litter of children’s schoolbooks and playthings, abandoned in the after-supper rout. At 11:05 he strode to the phone and put his hand on the receiver but was unable to dial the number that lived in his fingers like a musical phrase. Her number. Their number, the Masons’. The house that had swallowed his wife was one where he had always felt comfortable and welcome, a house much like his own, yet different enough in every detail to be exciting, and one whose mistress, waiting in it alone, for him, had stood naked at the head of the stairs. A dazzling welcome, her shoulders caped in morning sun coming through the window, the very filaments of her flesh on fire.

He went upstairs and checked on each sleeping child in the hope that thus a half-hour of waiting would be consumed. Down in the kitchen again he found that only five minutes had passed and, balked from more bourbon by the certainty that he would become drunk, tried to become angry. He thought of smashing the glass, realized that only he was here to clean it up, and set it down empty on the counter. Anger had never been easy for him; even as a child he had seen there was nobody to be angry at, only tired people anxious to please, good hearts asleep and awake, wrapped in the limits of a universe that itself, from the beauty of its details and its contagious air of freedom, seemed to have been well-intentioned. He tried, instead, to pass the time, to cry — but produced only the ridiculous dry snarling tears of a man alone. He might wake the children. He went outdoors, into the back yard. Through bushes that had shed their leaves he watched headlights hurrying home from meetings, from movies, from trysts. He imagined that tonight he would know the lights of her car even before they turned up the alley and flooded the yard in returning. The yard remained dark. The traffic was diminishing. He went back inside. The kitchen clock said 11:35. He went to the telephone and stared at it, puzzled by the problem it presented, of an invisible lock his fingers could not break. Thus he missed Joan’s headlights turning into the yard. By the time he looked she was walking toward him, beneath the maple tree, from the deadened car. She was wearing a white coat. He opened the kitchen door to greet her, but his impulse of embrace, to socket her into his chest like a heart that had orbited and returned, was abruptly obsolete, rendered showy and false by his wife’s total, disarming familiarity.

He asked, ‘How was it?’

She groaned. ‘They were both having terrible times finishing their sentences. It was agony’

‘Poor souls. Poor Joan.’ He remembered his own agony. ‘You promised to be home by eleven.’

In the kitchen she took off her coat and threw it over a chair. ‘I know, but it would have been too rude to leave, they were both so full of goodness and love. It was *terribly* frustrating; they wouldn’t let me be angry’ Her face looked flushed, her eyes bright, flying past his toward the counter, where the bourbon waited.

‘You can be angry at *me,’* he offered.

‘I’m too tired. I’m too confused. They were so sweet. He’s not angry at you, and she can’t imagine why I should be angry at her. Maybe I’m crazy. Could you make me a drink?’

She sat down on the kitchen chair, on top of her coat. ‘They’re like my parents,’ she said. ‘They believe in the perfectibility of man.’

He gave her the drink, and prompted, ‘She wouldn’t let you be angry.’

Joan sipped and sighed; she was like an actress just off the stage, her gestures still imbued with theatrical exaggeration. ‘I asked her how *she’d* feel and she said she’d have been *pleased* if I’d slept with him, that there isn’t any woman she’d rather he slept with, that I would have been a gift she’d have given out of *love*. She kept calling me her best friend, on and on in that soothing steady voice; I’d never thought of her as *that* much my best friend. All year I’d felt this constraint between us and of course now I know why. All year she’s been dancing up to me with this little impish arrogance I couldn’t understand.’

‘She likes you very much and we talked a lot about your reaction. She dreaded it.’

‘She kept *tell*ing me to be angry with her and of course her telling made it impossible. That soothing steady voice. I don’t think she heard a thing I said. I could see her concentrating, you know, really concentrating, on my lips, but all the time she was framing what she was going to say next. She’s been working on those speeches for a year. I’m looped. *Don’t* give me any more bourbon.’

‘And he?’

‘Oh, he. He was crazy. He kept talking of it as a *revelation*. Apparently they’ve been having great sex ever since she told him. He kept using words like understanding and compassion and how we must all *help* each other. It was like church, and you know how agitated I get in church, how I begin to cry. Every time I’d try to cry he’d kiss me, then he’d kiss her: absolutely impartial. Peck, peck. We’re the same person! She’s stolen my identity!’ She held up her glass of ice cubes and raised her eyebrows in indignation. Her hair, too, seemed to be lifting from her scalp; she had once described to him how at golf, when she flubbed a shot, she could hear her hair rustle as it rose in fury.

‘You have bushier hair,’ he said.

‘Thanks. You’re the one to know. He kept wanting to call you up. He kept saying things like, “Let’s get good old Richard down here, the son of a bitch. I miss the old seducer.” I had to keep telling him we needed you to baby-sit.’

‘Pretty unmanning.’

‘I think you’ve had enough manning for a while.’

‘You should have seen me waiting up. I kept running to all the windows like a hen with a lost chick. I was frantic for you, sweet. I never should have sent you down to those awful people to be lectured at.’

‘They’re not awful people. *You’re* the awful person. You’re just lucky they don’t believe in war. They think indignation is silly. Childish. They’re so *explan*atory, is all. He kept talking about some greater good coming out of this.’

‘And you? You believe in war, or a greater good?’

‘I don’t know. I could believe in a little more bourbon.’

His next question was hot, so full of remembered light it scorched his tongue. ‘Did she also want me there?’

‘She didn’t say. She’s not *that* tactless.’

‘I never found her tactless,’ he dared say.

Joan’s hair appeared to puff out from her head; she gestured like a soprano. ‘Why didn’t you run off with her? Why don’t you run off with her now? *Do* something. I can’t *stand* another one of these love-ins, or teach-ins, or whatever they are. They kept saying, we must all get together, we must all keep in touch. I don’t want to get together with *any*body.’

‘But it’s you —’ he began.

She interrupted: ‘Don’t spare the ice.’

‘— I seem to want most. I hated your being out of the house tonight. I hated it more than I would have supposed.’ He spoke very carefully, gazing downward at the counter as he refilled their glasses, which seemed balanced on the edge of a precipice; Joan’s safe return had uncovered within him the abysmal loss of, with her soothing steady voice, the other.