# Eros Rampant

# John Updike

THE MAPLES’ HOUSE is full of love. Bean, the six-year-old baby, loves Hecuba, the dog. John, who is eight, an angel-faced mystic serenely unable to ride a bicycle or read a clock, is in love with his Creepy Crawlers, his monster cards, his dinosaurs, and his carved rhinoceros from Kenya. He spends hours in his room after school drifting among these things, rearranging, gloating, humming. He experiences pain only when his older brother, Richard Jr, sardonically enters his room and pierces his placenta of contentment. Richard is in love with life, with all outdoors, with Carl Yastrzemski, Babe Parilli, the Boston Bruins, the Beatles, and with that shifty apparition who, comb in hand, peeps back shiny-eyed at him out of the mirror in the mornings, wearing a mustache of toothpaste. He receives strange challenging notes from girls — *Dickie Maple you stop looking at me —* which he brings home from school carelessly crumpled along with his spelling papers and hectographed notices about eye, tooth, and lung inspection. His feelings about young Mrs Brice, who confronts his section of the fifth grade with the enamelled poise and studio diction of an airline hostess, are so guarded as to be suspicious. He almost certainly loves, has always deeply loved, his older sister, Judith. Verging on thirteen, she has become difficult to contain, even within an incestuous passion. Large and bumptious, she eclipses his view of the television screen, loudly Frugs while he would listen to the Beatles, teases, thrashes, is bombarded and jogged by powerful rays from outer space. She hangs for hours by the corner where Mr Lunt, her history teacher, lives; she pastes effigies of the Monkees on her walls, French-kisses her mother good night, experiences the panic of sleeplessness, engages in long languorous tussles on the sofa with the dog. Hecuba, a spayed golden retriever, races from room to room, tormented as if by fleas by the itch for adoration, ears flattened, tail thumping, until at last she runs up against the cats, who do not love her, and she drops exhausted, in grateful defeat, on the kitchen linoleum, and sleeps.

The cats, Esther and Esau, lick each other’s fur and share a bowl. They had been two of a litter. Esther, the mother of more than thirty kittens mostly resembling her brother, but with a persistent black minority vindicating the howled appeal of a neighboring tom, has been ‘fixed’; Esau, sentimentally allowed to continue unfixed, now must venture from the house in quest of the bliss that had once been purely domestic. He returns scratched and battered. Esther licks his wounds while he leans dazed beside the refrigerator; even his purr is ragged. Nagging for their supper, they sit like bookends, their backs discreetly touching, an expert old married couple on the dole. One feels, unexpectedly, that Esau still loves Esther, while she merely accepts him. She seems scornful of his Platonic attentions. Is she puzzled by her abrupt surgical lack of what once drastically attracted him? But it is his big square tomcat’s head that seems puzzled, rather than her triangular feminine feline one. The children feel a difference; both Bean and John cuddle Esau more, now that Esther is sterile. Perhaps, obscurely, they feel that she has deprived them of a miracle, of the semiannual miracle of her kittens, of drowned miniature piglets wriggling alive from a black orifice more mysterious than a cave. Richard Jr, as if to demonstrate his superior purchase on manhood and its righteous compassion, makes a point of petting the two cats equally, stroke for stroke. Judith claims she hates them both; it is her chore to feed them supper, and she hates the smell of horsemeat. She loves, at least in the abstract, horses.

Mr Maple loves Mrs Maple. He goes through troublesome periods, often on Saturday afternoons, of being unable to take his eyes from her, of being captive to the absurd persuasion that the curve of her solid haunch conceals, enwraps, a precarious treasure confided to his care. He cannot touch her enough. The sight of her body contorted by one of her yoga exercises, in her elastic black leotard riddled with runs, twists his heart so that he cannot breathe. Her gesture as she tips the dregs of white wine into a potted geranium seems infinite, like one of Vermeer’s moments frozen in an eternal light from the left. At night he tries to press her into himself, to secure her drowsy body against his breast like a clasp, as if without it he will come undone. He cannot sleep in this position, yet maintains it long after her breathing has become steady and oblivious: can love be defined, simply, as the refusal to sleep? Also he loves Penelope Vo gel, a quaint little secretary at his office who is recovering from a disastrous affair with an Antiguan; and he is in love with the memories of six or so other females, beginning with a seven-year-old playmate who used to steal his hunter’s cap; and is half in love with death. He as well seems to love, perhaps alone in the nation, President Johnson, who is unaware of his existence. Along the same lines, Richard adores the moon; he studies avidly all the photographs beamed back from its uncongenial surface.

And Joan? Whom does she love? Her psychiatrist, certainly. Her father, inevitably. Her yoga instructor, probably. She has a part-time job in a museum and returns home flushed and quick-tongued, as if from sex. She must love the children, for they flock to her like sparrows to suet. They fight bitterly for a piece of her lap and turn their backs upon their father, as if he, the seed-bearing provider of their lives, were a grotesque intruder, a chimney sweep in a snow palace. None of his impersonations with the children — scoutmaster, playmate, confidant, financial bastion, factual wizard, watchman of the night — win them over; Bean still cries for Mommy when hurt, John approaches her for the money to finance yet more monster cards, Dickie demands that hers be the last good night, and even Judith, who should be his, kisses him timidly, and saves her open-mouthed passion for her mother. Joan swims through their love like a fish through water, ignorant of any other element. Love slows her footsteps, pours upon her from the radio, hangs about her, in the kitchen, in the form of tacked-up children’s drawings of houses, families, cars, cats, dogs, and flowers. Her husband cannot reach her: she is solid but hidden, like the World Bank; presiding yet impartial, like the federal judiciary. Some cold uncoördinated thing pushes at his hand as it hangs impotent; it is Hecuba’s nose. Obese spayed golden-eyed bitch, like him she abhors exclusion and strains to add her warmth to the tumble, in love with them all, in love with the smell of food, in love with the smell of love.

Penelope Vo gel takes care to speak without sentimentality; six years younger than Richard, she has endured a decade of amorous ordeals and, still single at twenty-nine, preserves herself by speaking dryly, in the flip phrases of a still-younger generation.

‘We had a good thing,’ she says of her Antiguan, ‘that became a bad scene.’

She handles, verbally, her old affairs like dried flowers; sitting across the restaurant table from her, Richard is made jittery by her delicacy, as if he and a grandmother are together examining an array of brittle, enigmatic mementos. ‘A very undesirable scene,’ Penelope adds. ‘The big time was too much for him. He got in with the drugs crowd. I couldn’t see it.’

‘He wanted to marry you?’ Richard asks timidly; this much is office gossip.

She shrugs, admitting, ‘There was that pitch.’

‘You must miss him.’

‘There is that. He was the most beautiful man I ever saw. His shoulders. In Dickinson’s Bay, he’d have me put my hand on his shoulder in the water and that way he’d pull me along for miles, swimming. He was a snorkel instructor.’

‘His name?’ Jittery, fearful of jarring these reminiscences, which are also negotiations, he spills the last of his Gibson, and jerkily signals to order another.

‘Hubert,’ Penelope says. She is patiently mopping with her napkin. ‘Like a girlfriend told me, Never take on a male beauty, you’ll have to fight for the mirror.’ Her face is small and very white, and her nose very long, her pink nostrils inflamed by a perpetual cold. Only a Negro, Richard thinks, could find her beautiful; the thought gives her, in the restless shadowy restaurant light, beauty. The waiter, black, comes and changes their tablecloth. Penelope continues so softly Richard must strain to hear, ‘When Hubert was eighteen he had a woman divorce her husband and leave her children for him. She was one of the old planter families. He wouldn’t marry her. He told me, If she’d do that to him, next thing she’d leave me. He was very moralistic, until he came up here. But imagine an eighteen-year-old boy having an effect like that on a mature married woman in her thirties.’

‘I better keep him away from my wife,’ Richard jokes.

‘Yeah.’ She does not smile. ‘They *work* at it, you know. Those boys are *pros*.’

Penelope has often been to the West Indies. In St Croix, it delicately emerges, there was Andrew, with his goatee and his septic-tank business and his political ambitions; in Guadeloupe, there was Ramon, a customs inspector; in Trinidad, Castlereigh, who played the alto pans in a steel band and also did the limbo. He could go down to nine inches. But Hubert was the worst, or best. He was the only one who had followed her north. ‘I was supposed to come live with him in this hotel in Jamaica Plain but I was scared to go near the place, full of cop-out types and the smell of pot in the elevator; I got two offers from guys just standing there pushing the Up button. It was not a healthy scene.’ The waiter brings them rolls; in his shadow her profile seems wan and he yearns to pluck her, pale flower, from the tangle she has conjured. ‘It got so bad,’ she says, ‘I tried going back to an old boyfriend, an awfully nice guy with a mother and a nervous stomach. He’s a computer systems analyst, very dedicated, but I don’t know, he just never impressed me. All he can talk about is his gastritis and how she keeps telling him to move out and get a wife, but he doesn’t know if she means it. His mother.’

‘He is … white?’

Penelope glances up; there is a glint off her halted butter knife. Her voice slows, goes drier. ‘No, as a matter of fact. He’s what they call an Afro-American. You mind?’

‘No, no, I was just wondering — his nervous stomach. He doesn’t sound like the others.’

‘He’s not. Like I say, he doesn’t impress me. Don’t you find, once you have something that works, it’s hard to back up?’ More seems meant than is stated; her level gaze, as she munches her thickly buttered bun, feels like one tangent in a complicated geometrical problem: find the point at which she had switched from white to black lovers.

The subject is changed for him; his heart jars, and he leans forward hastily to say, ‘See that woman who just came in? Leather suit, gypsy earrings, sitting down now? Her name is Eleanor Dennis. She lives down our street from us. She’s divorced.’

‘Who’s the man?’

‘I have no idea. Eleanor’s moved out of our circle. He looks like a real thug.’ Along the far wall, Eleanor adjusts the great loop of her earring; her sideways glance, in the shuffle of shadows, flicks past his table. He doubts that she saw him.

Penelope says, ‘From the look on your face, that was more than a circle she was in with you.’

He pretends to be disarmed by her guess, but in truth considers it providential that one of his own old loves should appear, to countervail the dark torrent of hers. For the rest of the meal they talk about *him*, him and Eleanor and Marlene Brossman and Joan and the little girl who used to steal his hunter’s cap. In the lobby of Penelope’s apartment house, the elevator summoned, he offers to go up with her.

She says carefully, ‘I don’t think you want to.’

‘But I *do*.’ The building is Back Bay modern; the lobby is garishly lit and furnished with plastic plants that need never be watered, Naugahyde chairs that were never sat upon, and tessellated plaques no one ever looks at. The light is an absolute presence, as even and clean as the light inside a freezer, as ubiquitous as ether or as the libido that, Freud says, permeates us all from infancy on.

‘No,’ Penelope repeats. ‘I’ve developed a good ear for sincerity in these things, I think you’re too wrapped up back home.’

‘The dog likes me,’ he confesses, and kisses her good night there, encased in brightness. Dry voice to the contrary, her lips are shockingly soft, wide, warm, and sorrowing.

‘So,’ Joan says to him. ‘You slept with that little office mouse.’ It is Saturday; the formless erotic suspense of the afternoon — the tennis games, the cartoon matinees — has passed. The Maples are in their room dressing for a party, by the ashen light of dusk, and the watery blue of a distant street lamp.

‘I never have,’ he says, thereby admitting, however, that he knows who she means.

‘Well, you took her to dinner.’

‘Who says?’

‘Mack Dennis. Eleanor saw the two of you in a restaurant.’

‘When do the Dennises converse? I thought they were divorced.’

‘They talk all the time. He’s still in love with her. Everybody knows that.’

‘O.K. When do he and *you* converse?’

Oddly, she has not prepared an answer. ‘Oh’ — his heart falls through her silence — ‘maybe I saw him in the hardware store this afternoon.’

‘And maybe you didn’t. Why would he blurt this out anyway? You and he must be on cozy terms.’

He says this to trigger her denial; but she mutely considers and, sauntering toward her closet, admits, ‘We understand each other.’

How unlike her, to bluff this way. ‘When was I supposedly seen?’

‘You mean it happens often? Last Wednesday, around eight-thirty. You *must* have slept with her.’

‘I couldn’t have. I was home by ten, you may remember. You had just gotten back yourself from the museum.’

‘What went wrong, darley? Did you offend her with your horrible pro-Vietnam stand?’

In the dim light he hardly knows this woman, her broken gestures, her hasty voice. Her silver slip glows and crackles as she wriggles into a black knit cocktail dress; with a kind of determined agitation she paces around the bed, to the bureau and back. As she moves, her body seems to be gathering bulk from the shadows, bulk and a dynamic elasticity. He tries to placate her with a token offering of truth. ‘No, it turns out Penelope only goes with Negroes. I’m too pale for her.’

‘You admit you tried?’

He nods.

‘Well,’ Joan says, and takes a half-step toward him, so that he flinches in anticipation of being hit, ‘do you want to know who *I* was sleeping with Wednesday?’

He nods again, but the two nods feel different, as if a continent had hurtled by between them, at this terrific unfelt speed.

She names a man he knows only slightly, an assistant director in the museum, who wears a collar pin and has his gray hair cut long and tucked back in the foppish English style. ‘It was *fun*,’ Joan says, kicking at a shoe. ‘He thinks I’m *beau*tiful. He cares for me in a way you just *don’t*.’ She kicks away the other shoe. ‘You look pale to me too, buster.’

Stunned, he needs to laugh. ‘But we *all* think you’re beautiful.’

‘Well, you don’t make me *feel* it.’

‘*I* feel it,’ he says.

‘You make me feel like an ugly drudge.’ As they grope to understand their new positions, they realize that she, like a chess player who has impulsively swept forward her queen, has nowhere to go but on the defensive. In a desperate attempt to keep the initiative, she says, ‘Divorce me. Beat me.’

He is calm, factual, admirable. ‘How often have you been with him?’

‘I don’t know. Since April, off and on.’ Her hands appear to embarrass her; she places them at her sides, against her cheeks, together on the bedpost, off. ‘I’ve been trying to get out of it, I’ve felt horribly guilty, but he’s never been at all pushy, so I could never really arrange a fight. He gets this hurt look.’

‘Do you want to keep him?’

‘With you knowing? Don’t be grotesque.’

‘But he cares for you in a way I just don’t.’

‘Any lover does that.’

‘God help us. You’re an expert.’

‘Hardly.’

‘What *about* you and Mack?’

She is frightened. ‘Years ago. Not for very long.’

‘And Freddy Vetter?’

‘No, we agreed not. He knew about me and Mack.’

Love, a cloudy heavy ink, inundates him from within, suffuses his palms with tingling pressure as he steps close to her, her murky face held tense against the expectation of a blow. ‘You whore,’ he breathes, enraptured. ‘My virgin bride.’ He kisses her hands; they are corrupt and cold. ‘Who else?’ he begs, as if each name is a burden of treasure she will lay upon his bowed shoulders. ‘Tell me all your men.’

‘I’ve told you. It’s a pretty austere list. You know *why* I told you? So you wouldn’t feel guilty about this Vogel person.’

‘But nothing happened. When you do it, it happens.’

‘Sweetie, I’m a woman,’ she explains, and they do seem, in this darkening room above the muted hubbub of television, to have reverted to the bases of their marriage, to the elemental constituents. Woman. Man. House.

‘What does your psychiatrist say about all this?’

‘Not much.’ The triumphant swell of her confession has passed; her ebbed manner prepares for days, weeks of his questions. She retrieves the shoes she kicked away. ‘That’s one of the reasons I went to him, I kept having these affairs —’

‘*Kept* having? You’re killing me.’

‘Please don’t interrupt. It was somehow very innocent. I’d go into his office, and lie down, and say, “I’ve just been with Mack, or Otto —”’

‘Otto. What’s that joke? “Otto” spelled backwards is “Otto.” “Otto” spelled inside out is “toot.”’

‘— and I’d say it was wonderful, or awful, or so-so, and then we’d talk about my childhood masturbation. It’s not his business to scold me, it’s his job to get me to stop scolding myself.’

‘The poor bastard, all the time I’ve been jealous of him, and he’s been suffering with this for years; he had to listen every *day*. You’d go in there and plunk yourself still warm down on his couch —’

‘It wasn’t every day at all. Weeks would go by. I’m not Otto’s only woman.’

The artificial tumult of television below merges with a real commotion, a screaming and bumping that mounts the stairs and threatens the aquarium where the Maples are swimming, dark fish in ink, their outlines barely visible, known to each other only as eddies of warmth, as mysterious animate chasms in the surface of space. Fearing that for years he will not again be so close to Joan, or she be so open, he hurriedly asks, ‘And what about the yoga instructor?’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Joan says, clasping her pearls at the nape of her neck. ‘He’s an elderly vegetarian.’

The door crashes open; their bedroom explodes in shards of electric light. Richard Jr is frantic, sobbing.

‘Mommy, Judy keeps *teasing* me and getting in front of the *tele*vision!’

‘I did not. I did not.’ Judith speaks very distinctly. ‘Mother and Father, he is a retarded liar.’

‘She can’t help she’s growing,’ Richard tells his son, picturing poor Judith trying to fit herself among the intent childish silhouettes in the little television room, pitying her for her size, much as he pities Johnson for his Presidency. Bean bursts into the bedroom, frightened by violence not on TV, and Hecuba leaps upon the bed with rolling golden eyes, and Judith gives Dickie an impudent and unrepentant sideways glance, and he, gagging on a surfeit of emotion, bolts from the room. Soon there arises from the other end of the upstairs an anguished squawk as Dickie invades John’s room and punctures his communion with his dinosaurs. Downstairs, a woman, neglected and alone, locked in a box, sings about *amore*. Bean hugs Joan’s legs so she cannot move.

Judith asks with parental sharpness, ‘What were you two talking about?’

‘Nothing,’ Richard says. ‘We were getting dressed.’

‘Why were all the lights out?’

‘We were saving electricity,’ her father tells her.

‘Why is Mommy crying?’ He looks, disbelieving, and discovers that, indeed, her cheeks coated with silver, she is.

At the party, amid clouds of friends and smoke, Richard resists being parted from his wife’s side. She has dried her tears, and faintly swaggers, as when, on the beach, she dares wear a bikini. But her nakedness is only in his eyes. Her head beside his shoulder, her grave polite pleasantries, the plump unrepentant cleft between her breasts, all seem newly treasurable and intrinsic to his own identity. As a cuckold, he has grown taller, attenuated, more elegant and humane in his opinions, airier and more mobile. When the usual argument about Vietnam commences, he hears himself sounding like a dove. He concedes that Johnson is unlovable. He allows that Asia is infinitely complex, devious, ungrateful, feminine: but must we abandon her therefore? When Mack Dennis, grown burly in bachelorhood, comes and asks Joan to dance, Richard feels unmanned and sits on the sofa with such an air of weariness that Marlene Brossman sits down beside him and, for the first time in years, flirts. He tries to tell her with his voice, beneath the meaningless words he is speaking, that he loved her, and could love her again, but that at the moment he is terribly distracted and must be excused. He goes and asks Joan if it isn’t time to go. She resists: ‘It’s too rude.’ She is safe here among social proprieties and foresees that his exploitation of the territory she has surrendered will be thorough. Love is pitiless. They drive home at midnight under a slim moon nothing like its photographs — shadow-caped canyons, gimlet mountain ranges, gritty circular depressions around the metal feet of the mechanical intruder sent from the blue ball in the sky.

They do not rest until he has elicited from her a world of details: dates, sites, motel interiors, precisely mixed emotions. They make love, self-critically. He exacts the new wantonness she owes him, and in compensation tries to be, like a battered old roué, skillful. He satisfies himself that in some elemental way he has never been displaced; that for months she has been struggling in her lover’s grasp, in the gauze net of love, her wings pinioned by tact. She assures him that she seized on the first opportunity for confession; she confides to him that Otto spray-sets his hair and uses a scent. She, weeping, vows that nowhere, never, has she encountered his, Richard’s, passion, his pleasant bodily proportions and backwards-reeling grace, his invigorating sadism, his male richness. Then why …? She is asleep. Her breathing has become oblivious. He clasps her limp body to his, wasting forgiveness upon her ghostly form. A receding truck pulls the night’s silence taut. She has left him a hair short of satiety; her confession feels still a fraction unplumbed. The lunar face of the electric clock says three. He turns, flips his pillow, restlessly adjusts his arms, turns again, and seems to go downstairs for a glass of milk.

To his surprise, the kitchen is brightly lit, and Joan is on the linoleum floor, in her leotard. He stands amazed while she serenely twists her legs into the lotus position. He asks her again about the yoga instructor.

‘Well, I didn’t think it counted if it was part of the exercise. The whole point, darley, is to make mind and body one. This is pranayama — breath control.’ Stately, she pinches shut one nostril and slowly inhales, then pinches shut the other and exhales. Her hands return, palm up, to her knees. And she smiles. ‘This one is fun. It’s called the Twist.’ She assumes a new position, her muscles elastic under the black cloth tormented into runs. ‘Oh, I forgot to tell you, I’ve slept with Harry Saxon.’

‘Joan, no. How often?’

‘When we felt like it. We used to go out behind the Little League field. That heavenly smell of clover.’

‘But, sweetie, why?’

Smiling, she inwardly counts the seconds of this position. ‘You know why. He asked. It’s hard, when men ask. You mustn’t insult their male natures. There’s a harmony in everything.’

‘And Freddy Vetter? You lied about Freddy, didn’t you?’

‘Now, *this* pose is wonderful for the throat muscles. It’s called the Lion. You mustn’t laugh.’ She kneels, her buttocks on her heels, and tilts back her head, and from gaping jaws thrusts out her tongue as if to touch the ceiling. Yet she continues speaking. ‘The whole theory is, we hold our heads too high, and blood can’t get to the brain.’

His chest hurts; he forces from it the cry, ‘Tell me everybody!’

She rolls toward him and stands upright on her shoulders, her face flushed with the effort of equilibrium and the downflow of blood. Her legs slowly scissor open and shut. ‘Some men you don’t know,’ she goes on. ‘They come to the door to sell you septic tanks.’ Her voice is coming from her belly. Worse, there is a humming. Terrified, he awakes, and sits up. His chest is soaked.

He locates the humming as a noise from the transformer on the telephone pole near their windows. All night, while its residents sleep, the town murmurs to itself electrically. Richard’s terror persists, generating mass as the reality of his dream sensations is confirmed. Joan’s body asleep beside him seems small, scarcely bigger than Judith’s, and narrower with age, yet infinitely deep, an abyss of secrecy, perfidy, and acceptingness; acrophobia launches sweat from his palms. He leaves the bed as if scrambling backwards from the lip of a vortex. He again goes downstairs; his wife’s revelations have steepened the treads and left the walls slippery.

The kitchen is dark; he turns on the light. The floor is bare. The familiar objects of the kitchen seem discovered in a preservative state of staleness, wearing a look of tension, as if they are about to burst with the strain of being so faithfully themselves. Esther and Esau pad in from the living room, where they have been sleeping on the sofa, and beg to be fed, sitting like bookends, expectant and expert. The clock says four. Watchman of the night. But in searching for signs of criminal entry, for traces of his dream, Richard finds nothing but — clues mocking in their very abundance — the tacked-up drawings done by children’s fingers ardently bunched around a crayon, of houses, cars, cats, and flowers.