# Four Sides of One Story

# John Updike

## Tristan

MY LOVE:

Forgive me, I seem to be on a boat. The shock of leaving you numbed me rather nicely to the usual humiliations of boarding—why is it that in a pier shed everyone, no matter how well-born and self-esteeming, looks like a rag-clad peasant, and is treated accordingly?—and even though we are now two days out to sea, and I can repose, technically, in your utter inaccessibility, I still am unable to focus on my fellow-passengers, though for a split second of, as it were, absent-minded sanity, I did prophetically perceive, through a chink in my obsession, that the waiter, having sized me up as one of the helpless solitaries of the world, would give me arrogant service and expect in exchange, at journey’s end, an apologetically huge tip. No matter. The next instant, I unfolded the napkin, and your sigh, shaped exactly like a dove, the blue tint of its throat visibly clouding for a moment the flame of the candle on the table, escaped; and I was plunged back into the moist murmurs, the eclipsed whispers, the vows instantly hissingly retracted, the exchanged sweats, of our love.

The boat shakes. The vibration is incessant and ubiquitous; it has sniffed me out even here, in the writing room, a dark nook staffed by a dour young Turinese steward and stocked, to qualify as a library, with tattered copies of *Paris Match* and, behind glass, seventeen gorgeously bound and impeccably unread volumes of D’Annunzio, in of course Italian. So that the tremor in my handwriting is a purely motor affair, and the occasional splotches you may consider droplets of venturesome spray. As a matter of fact, there is a goodly roll, though we have headed into sunny latitudes. When they try to fill the swimming pool, the water thrashes and pitches so hysterically that I peek over the edge expecting to see a captured dolphin. In the bar, the bottles tinkle like some large but dainty Swiss gadget, and the daiquiris come to you aquiver, little circlets of agitation spinning back and forth between the center and the rim. The first day, having forgotten, in my landlocked days with you, the feel of an ocean voyage, I was standing in the cabin-class lobby, waiting to try to buy my way toward a higher deck and if possible a porthole, when, without any visible change in the disposition of furniture, lighting fixtures, potted palms, or polyglot bulletin board, the floor like a great flat magnet suddenly rendered my blood heavy—extraordinarily heavy. There were people around me, and their facial expressions did not alter by one millimeter. It was quite comic, for as the ship rolled back the other way my blood absolutely *swung* upward in my veins—do you remember how your arm feels in the first instant after a bruise?—and it seemed imminent that I, and, if I, all these deadpanned others too, would lift like helium balloons and be bumpingly pasted to the ceiling, from which the ship’s staff would have to rescue us, irritably, with broom handles. The vision passed. The ship rolled again. My blood went heavy again. It seemed that you were near.

Iseult. I must write your name. Iseult. I am bleeding to death. Certainly I feel bloodless, or, more precisely, diluted, diluted by half, since everything around me—the white ropes, the ingenious little magnetic catches that keep the doors from swinging, the charmingly tessellated triangular shower stall in my cabin, the luxurious and pampered textures on every side—I seem to see, or touch, or smile over, with you, which means, since you are not here, that I only half see, only half exist. I keep thinking what a pity all this luxury is wasted on me, Tristan the Austere, the Perpetually Grieving, the Orphaned, the Homeless. The very pen I am writing this with is an old-fashioned dip, or nib, pen, whose flexibility irresistibly invites flourishes that sit up wet and bluely gleaming for minutes before finally deigning to dry. The holder is some sort of polished Asiatic wood. Teak? Ebony? You would know. It was enchanting for me, how you knew the names of surfaces, how you had the innocence to stroke a pelt and not flinch from the panicked little quick-eyed death beneath; for me, who have always been on the verge of becoming a vegetarian, which Mark, I know, would say was a form of death wish (I can’t describe to you how stupid that man seems to me; unfairly enough, even what tiny truth there is in him seems backed by this immense capital—these armies, this downright empire—of stupidity, so that even when he says something intelligent it affects me like Gospel quoted in support of the separation of the races. This parenthesis has gotten out of all control. If it seems ugly to you, blame it on jealousy. I am not sure, however, if I hate your husband because he—if only legally—possesses you, or if, more subtly, because he senses my own fear of just such legal possession, which gives him, for all his grossness, his grotesque patronization and prattling, a curious moral hold over me which I cannot, writhe as I will, break. End parenthesis).

An especially, almost maliciously, prolonged roll of the boat just slid the ink bottle, unspilled, the width of my cubbyhole and gave me the choice of fixing my eyes on the horizon or beginning to be seasick.

Where was I?

For me it was wonderful to become a partner in your response to textures. Your shallowness, as my wife calls it—and, as with everything she says, there is something in it which, at the least, gives dismissal pause—broke a new dimension into my hitherto inadequately superficial world. Now, adrift in this luxurious island universe, where music plays like a constant headache, I see everything through your eyes, conduct circular conversations with you in my head, and rest my hand on the wiped mahogany of the bar as if the tremor beneath the surface is you, a mermaid rising. What are our conversations about? I make, my mind tediously sifting the rubble of the emotional landslide, small discoveries about us that I hasten to convey to you, who are never quite as impressed by them as I hoped you would be. Yesterday, for example, at about 3:30 p.m., when the sallow sun suddenly ceased to justify sitting in a deck chair, I discovered, in the act of folding the blanket, that I had never, in my heart, taken your sufferings as seriously as my own. That you were unhappy, I knew. I could diagram the mechanics of the bind you were in, could trace the vivacious contours and taste the bright, flat colors of your plight—indeed, I could picture your torment so clearly that I felt I was feeling it with you. But no, there was a final kind of credence that I denied your pain, which cheated it of dimension and weight. You were the object of my desire and as such *la belle dame sans merci*. And so, reciprocally, I showed you no mercy. For this I belatedly apologized. In my head you accepted the apology with a laugh, and then wished to go on and discuss the practical aspects of our elopement. Two hours later, pinning a quivering daiquiri to the bar with my fingers, I rather jerkily formulated this comforting thought: However else I failed you, I never pretended to feel other than love for you, I never in any way offered to restrict, or control, the love you felt for me. Whatever sacrifices you offered to make, whatever agony you volunteered to undergo for me, I permitted. In the limitless extent of my willingness to accept your love, I was the perfect lover. Another man, seeing you flail and lacerate yourself so cruelly, might have out of timid squeamishness (calling it pity) pretended to turn his back, and saved your skin at the price of your dignity. But I, whether merely hypnotized or actually suicidal, steadfastly kept my face turned toward the blaze between us, while my eyes watered, my nose peeled, and my eyebrows disappeared in twin whiffs of smoke. It took all the peculiar strength of my egotism not to flinch and flaw the purity of your generous fury. No? For several hours I discussed this with you, or, rather, vented exhaustive rewordings upon your silent phantom, whose comprehension effortlessly widened, in watery rings, to include every elaboration.

Then, at last weary, brushing my teeth while the shower curtains moved back and forth beside me like two sluggish, rustling pendulums, I received, as if it were a revelation absolutely gravitational in importance, the syllogism that (major premise), however much we have suffered because of each other, it is quite out of the question for me to blame you for my pain, though strictly speaking you were the cause; and, since (minor premise) you and I as lovers were mirrors and always felt the same, therefore (conclusion) this must also be the case with you. *Ergo*, my mind is at peace. That is, it is a paradoxical ethical situation to be repeatedly wounded by someone *because he or she is beloved*. Those small incidentals within my adoration, those crumbs of Mark’s influence that I could never digest, those cinders from past flames unswept from your corners, the flecks of a callous queenliness, even moments when you seemed physically ordinary—it was never these that hurt me. It was your *perfection* that destroyed me, demented my logical workings, unmanned my healthy honor, bled me white. But I bear no grudge. And thus know that you bear none; and this knowledge, in the midst of my restless misery, gives me ease. As if what I wish to possess forever is not your presence but your good opinion.

I was rather disturbed to learn, from Brangien, just before I left, that you are seeing a psychiatrist. I cannot believe there is anything abnormal or curable about our predicament. We are in love. The only way out of it is marriage, or some sufficiently pungent piece of overexposure equivalent to marriage. I am prepared to devote my life to avoiding this death. As you were brave in creating our love, so I must be brave in preserving it. My body aches for the fatal surfeit of you. It creaks under the denial like a strained ship. A hundred times a day I consider casting myself loose from this implacable liner and giving myself to the waves on the implausible chance that I might again drift to you as once I drifted, pustular, harping, and all but lifeless, into Whitehaven. But I who slew the Morholt slay this Hydra of yearning again and again. My ship plows on, bleeding a straight wake of a paler, milky green, heading Heaven knows where, but away, away from the realms of compromise and muddle wherein our love, like a composted flower, would be returned to the stupid earth. Yes, had we met as innocents, we could have indulged our love and let it run its natural course of passion, consummation, satiety, contentment, boredom, betrayal. But, being guilty, we can seize instead a purity that will pass without interruption through death itself. Do you remember how, by the river, staking your life on a technicality, you seized the white-hot iron, took nine steps, and showed all Cornwall your cold, clean palms? It is from you that I take my example. Do you remember in the Isak Dinesen book I gave you the story in which God is described as He who says No? By saying No to our love we become, you and I, gods. I feel this is blasphemy and yet I write it.

The distance between us increases. Bells ring. The Turinese steward is locking up the bookcase. I miss you. I am true to you. Let us live, forever apart, as a shame to the world where everything is lost save what we ourselves deny.

T.

## Iseult of the White Hands

DEAR KAHERDIN:

Sorry not to have written before. This way of life we’ve all been living doesn’t conduce to much spare time. I haven’t read a book or magazine in weeks. Now the brats are asleep (I think), the dishes are chugging away in the washer, and here I sit with my fifth glass of Noilly Prat for the day. You were the only one he ever confided in, so I tell you. He’s left me again. On the other hand, he’s also left her. What do you make of it? She is taking it, from appearances, fairly well. She was at a castle do Saturday night and seemed much the same, only thinner. Mark kept a heavy eye on her all evening. At least she has *him*; all I seem to have is a house, a brother, a bank account, and a ghost. The night before he sailed, he explained to me, with great tenderness, etc., that he married me as a kind of pun. That the thing that drew him to me was my having her name. It was all—seven years, three children—a kind of Freudian slip, and he was really charmingly boyish as he begged to be excused. He even made me laugh about it.

If I had any dignity I’d be dead or insane. I don’t know if I love him or what love is or even if I want to find out. I tried to tell him that if he loved her and couldn’t help it he should leave me and go to her, and not torment us both indefinitely. I’ve never much liked her, which oddly enough offends him, but I really do sympathize with what he must have put her through. He seems to think there’s something so beautiful about hanging between us that he won’t let go with either hand. He’s rapidly going from the sublime to the ridiculous. Mark, who in his bullying way wants to be sensible and fair, had his lawyers on the move, and I was almost looking forward to six weeks on a ranch somewhere. But no. After his spending the whole summer climbing fences, faking appointments, etc., anything that looks like real action terrifies him and he gets on a boat. And through it all, making life a hell for everybody concerned, including the children, he wears this saintly pained look and insists he’s trying to do the right thing. What was really annihilating wasn’t his abuse of me, but what he called kindness.

I’ve mentally fiddled with your invitation to come back to Carhaix, but there seems no point. The children are in school, I have friends here, life goes on: I’ve explained his absence as a business trip, which everybody accepts and nobody believes. The local men are both a comfort and a menace—I guess it’s their being a menace that makes them a comfort. My virtue is reasonably safe. It all comes back to me, this business of managing suitors, keeping each at the proper distance, not too close and not too far, trying to remember exactly what has been said to each. Mark’s eye, for that matter, was heavy on *me* for a few moments at the party. It’s essentially disgusting. But nothing else is keeping my ego afloat.

I could never get out of him what she had that I didn’t. If you know, as a man, don’t tell me, please. But I can’t see that it was our looks, or brains, or even in bed. The better I was in bed, the worse it made him. He took it as a reproach, and used to tell me I was beautiful as if it were some cruel joke I had played on him. The harder I tried, the more I became a kind of distasteful parody. But of what? She is really too shallow and silly even for me to hate. Maybe that’s it. I feel I’m dropped, *bump*, as one drops any solid object, but she, she is sought in her abandonment. His heart rebounds from shapeless surfaces—the sky, the forest roof, the sea—and gives him back a terror which is her form. The worst of it is, I sympathize. I’m even jealous of his misery. At least it’s a kind of pointed misery. His version is that they drank from the same cup. It has nothing to do with our merits, but she loves him and I don’t. I just think I do. But if I don’t love him, I’ve never loved anything. Do you think this is so? You’ve known me since I was born, and I’m frightened of your answer. I’m frightened. At night I take one of the children into bed with me and hold him/her for hours. My eyelids won’t close, it scalds when I shut them. I never knew what jealousy was. It’s an endlessly hungry thing. It really just consumes and churns and I can’t focus on anything. I remember how I used to read a newspaper and care and it seems like another person. In the day I can manage, and on the nights when I go out, but in the evenings when I’m alone, there is an hour, right now, when everything is so hollow there is no limit to how low I and my Noilly Prat can go. I didn’t mean to put this into a letter. I wanted to be cheerful, and brave, and funny about it. You have your own life. My love to your family. The physical health here is oddly good. Please, *please* don’t say anything to Mother and Daddy. They wouldn’t understand and their worrying would just confuse me. I’m really all right, except right now. My fundamental impression I think is of the incredible wastefulness of being alive.

Love,

Iseult

## Iseult the Fair

## (Unsent)

TRISTAN:

Tristan

Tristan Tristan

flowers—books—

Your letter confused and dismayed me—I showed it to Mark—he is thinking of suing you again—pathetic—his attempts to make himself matter. Between words I listen for his knock on the door—if he knew what I was writing he would kick me out—and he’s right.

my king brought low

forgive?????

an easy word for you

I wanted to grow fat in your arms and sleep—you ravished me with absences—enlarged our love at our expense—tore me every time we parted—I have lost 12 pounds and live on pills—I dismay myself.

Your wife looks well.

Trist

Mr.

Mrs.

the flowers are dead and the books hidden and a hard winter is here—his knock on the door—

Kill You. I must kill you in my heart—shut you out—don’t knock even if I listen. Return to your wife—try—honestly try with her. She hates me but I love her for the sorrow I have brought her—no—I hate her because she would not admit what everybody could see—she had given you up. I had earned you.

the pen in my hand

the whiteness of the paper

a draft on my ankles—the stone floor—the sounds of the castle—your step?

Beware of Mark—he is strong—pathetic—my king brought low—he protects me. I am teaching myself to love him.

I would have loved the boat.

Love is too painful.

If the narcissi you planted come up next spring I will dig them out.

What a funny thing to write—I can’t tell if this is a letter to you or not—I dismay myself—Mark thinks I should be committed—he is more mature than you and I

do you remember the flowers and the books you gave me?

For my sake end it—your knock never comes—the winter here is hard—children sledding—the mountains are sharp through the window—I have a scratchy throat—Mark says psychosomatic—I hear you laugh.

Tr

Please return—nothing matters

## King Mark

MY DEAR DENOALEN:

Your advice has been followed with exemplary success. Confronted with the actuality of marriage, the young man bolted even sooner than we had anticipated. The Queen is accordingly disillusioned and satisfactorily tractable.

Therefore I think that the several legal proceedings against them both may be halted at this time. By no means, however, do I wish to waive all possibility of further legal action. I am in possession of an interminable, impudent, and incriminating letter written by the confessed lover subsequent to his defection. If you desire, I will forward it to you for photo-static reproduction as a safeguard.

In the case that, through some event or events unforeseen, the matter were after all to come to court, I agree wholeheartedly that their plea of having accidentally partaken of a magic potion will not stand up. Yet your strong suggestion that execution should be the punishment for both does not seem to me to allow for what possible extenuating circumstances there are. It is indisputable, for example, that throughout the affair Tristan continued to manifest, in battle, perfect loyalty to me, and prowess quite in keeping with the standards he had set in the days prior to his supposed enchantment. Also, their twin protestations of affection for me, despite their brazen and neurotic pursuance of physical union, did not ring entirely falsely. It was, after all, Tristan’s feat (i.e., slaying the dragon of Whitehaven) that brought her to Tintagel; and, while of course this is in no sense a legally defensible claim, I can appreciate that, in immature and excitable minds, it might serve as a shadow of a claim. It will do us both good, as fair-minded Englishmen, to remember that we are dealing here with a woman of Irish blood and a man whose upbringing was entirely Continental. In addition, there is the Queen herself as a political property to consider. Alive, she adorns my court. The populace is partial to her. Further, the long peace between Ireland and Cornwall which our marriage has assured should not be rashly jeopardized.

Weighing all these factors, then, and not excluding the private dispositions of my heart, I have settled on a course of action more moderate than that which you now advise. Tristan’s banishment we may assume to be permanent. Return will result in recapture, trial, and death. The Queen will remain by my side. Her long sojourn in the Wood of Morois has without doubt heightened her appreciation of the material advantages she enjoys in my palace. My power and compassion have been manifested to her, and she is essentially too rational to resist their imperative appeal. As long as her present distracted state obtains, I am compelling her to submit to psychoanalysis. If her distraction persists without improvement, I will have her committed. I am confident this will not be necessary. On the remote chance that the “magic potion” is more than a fable, I have instructed my alchemists to develop an antidote. I am fully in control of matters at last.

All the best,

*(Dictated but not signed)*

Mark: Rex