# The Morning

# John Updike

HE LIVED ALONE, in a room only she had ever made habitable. Each morning he awoke to the same walls and was always slightly surprised at the sameness of the cracks and nail holes and replastered patches, as if this pattern were a set of thoughts to which a night’s solid meditation had not added the merest nick of a new idea. He awoke to the same ticking clock on the mock mantel, the same shivering half-height refrigerator, the same nagging sour smell that, behind the baseboard and around the sink, had come to live with him. He would dress, and boil an egg, and crack it on a piece of toast, and heat last evening’s coffee, and rinse the plate and cup, and take up a book, and sit and wait. The chair would grow suffocating. The sense of the words would skid and circle senselessly under the print. He would rise, and walk around the room, pausing at every place where they had lain together, staring, as if terrified, at the bed that still bore two pillows. She was a nurse, and worked afternoons and evenings, and used to come to him in the mornings. He was a student, but of what, he had forgotten. As if to remember, he would look out the window.

Of the city outside, he could see several brick walls, and a small flat roof of pebbles her bare feet had consecrated in the summer past, and a rusty construct of metal, almost organically complex, that was a chimney or a vent or the mouth of a chute and that may or may not have been in use. In the broad gaps between brick walls he could see a skyline that had a gold dome in it, and delicate smokestacks which the morning sun whittled like church balusters, and parallel plumes of smoke quickly indistinguishable from natural clouds, and a kind of subdued twinkle, as upon a tranquil ocean, that testified to the world of activity the city concealed. At moments his dull attention caught, like a slack sail idly filling, a breath, from this multifaceted horizon, of the hope that set in motion and sustained so many industrial efforts, so much commercial traffic, such ingenious cross-fertilization of profit, such energetic devotion to the metamorphosis of minerals, the transport of goods, the interplay of calculations, the efficiency of machines. The skyline then spread itself before his eyes like one of those laborious Asiatic pictorial conceits that compose an elephant out of naked maidens, or depict a tree of gods whose faintest twig doubles as a smile and whose smallest bud is also a fingernail. A sense of human constructiveness would seize him and try to lift him again into the airy realm of fresh ideas, eddying notes, scholarly ambition, and purpose. The forgotten object of his studies would present itself to him like a long-scorned wife who has taken a lover and again grown beautiful. He would panic with jealousy. But the pang, like a flitting glimmer from something reflective on the horizon, would pass; his eyes would shorten their focus and he would leadenly observe how the rectangular windowpanes were being rounded by the infringement of successive layers of paint carelessly applied to the muntins. A kind of demon of disconnection would abruptly occupy his body, and he felt his heart as an angrily pulsing intruder, his hands as hanging presences weighted with blood sent from a great distance. He felt within himself the intricate scaffolding of mechanical connection and chemical coöperation that upheld his life, and experienced its complexity as a terrible tenuousness. He would go to the sofa and lift one of the cushions. There, in a dingy sanctum of upholstery, lay a few long hairs, almost invisible on the black cloth. He would study them as if to recreate the head from which they had strayed, and the face that had masked this head with a soul, and the body that had given this soul extension. By picking up one hair and holding it to the light he could detect a faint ghost of the red-gold color that used to spill, a careless gift, across his bare shoulders. He would replace the hair, and restore the cushion, as spinsters press a flower into a Bible.

The room was, if anything, bigger than it needed to be. When he sat and tried to read, the unused space seemed to watch him with eyes of knobs and nail holes and knotted configurations in the carpet. The space cried for another person to occupy it. Two had just fitted in this room; their voices had flattened the walls, pressed the furniture back into its servile state of being wood and cloth, submerged the shuddering of the refrigerator and the ticking of the clock. When he opened the door to her (she always looked a little startled and wary, but why?—who could she expect it to be but him?), his heart would fill his chest so tightly he had to hold her against him, like a compress, for minutes while the threat of its bursting subsided.

From the first, their embrace had seemed predetermined. His hands always went to the same places on her back, one at the nape of her neck, the other at the base of her spine. Always he rested his face on the same side of her head, so that for all he knew now she might have worn a different perfume behind the other ear. The perfume he inhaled was powdery, a hushed fragrance less of flowers than of spice, strangely far away in the wilds of her hair, and tinged, perhaps only in his imagination, with an ethereal sweetness left from the hospital corridors. She was clean, beautifully clean, and he had associated this also with her work in the hospital, work which, it seemed to him, in its daily experience of bodies enabled her to accept, so totally, so frontally, his own.

Usually she would be wearing a street dress when she came, blue or green or brown, and when she left, at noon, she would be wearing a nurse’s white uniform. Between these two costumes there was a third, when she was clothed in her skin and its aura; so that the morning, which in the days before she first came had been so single in its purpose and so monotonous in its execution, became instead a triptych, whose two side panels, when her footsteps had receded down the stairs and the outer door of the building had closed behind her, folded in memory over the central panel, whose beauty could not be remembered but had to be, each time, revealed. The very hours took their tint from the pattern of her visits, the hour after nine being blue or green or brown, the hour after that tan and auburn and pink and pale, and the final hour, the most hurried, often reduced to a few quick minutes, sheer white, like the flash that engulfs the screen when the film has run out and clatters loosely in the projector. Perhaps because these minutes were closest to him, across the long gap that separated him from her last visit, he saw them most distinctly—the square folds of her starched blouse, the sudden bun she composed with the hairpins they could find, the flat white shoes and plain cotton stockings that, in innocently shaping her calves and starkly emphasizing her female solidity, revived the erotic fire that her natural body, in its pliant naturalness, had damped.

He loved her in her uniform, and on the occasions when he had ventured into the hospital for a glimpse of her he felt in the corridors of identically uniformed women as if he were raiding a harem, or a cloister of the lascivious nuns who populate French pornography. There was, in her rising from beside him to don white, something blasphemous and yet holy, a reassumption of virginity emblematic of the (to a man) mysterious inviolability of a woman. It was like nothing else in his experience. A book, once read, can only be reread; a machine, used, imperceptibly wears out. But she, she came to him always beautifully clean and slightly startled, like a morning, and left, at noon, immaculate.

Dressed otherwise, she was in comparison disappointing. Often she left her heels and silk stockings and street dress behind in his room, as a pledge to return. Their presence was not as satisfying as it should have been; there was an unease surrounding them, a vague request to be explained and justified. And when, in the night, she returned, and passed from the uniform into them, it was a descent. Dressed as other women, she became one of them, a woman who sat in restaurants, and ate the food, and drank sometimes too much, and nervously crossed and recrossed the legs self-consciously lengthened by high spike heels, and talked a little awry. He impossibly expected of her conversation the same total frontal fit her body gave him. The woman separated from him by a restaurant table was a needless addition to the woman who was perfect; she wished to add to the love that needed nothing but endless continuance. It was this woman who hinted of marriage, and it was this woman who, in the dim restaurant light, misread his word “unable” to mean “unwilling,” and took offense.

These evenings with her, which ended sharply and chastely at midnight, when the curfew fell in the supervised apartment where she lived, were less than entirely real and blended with the cramped dreams that dissolved under the triumphal advent of morning. Morning brought him onto another plane altogether, as when one looks up from a crowded printed page to a door upon which a knock has just sounded. Awake, he would gratefully drink the radiance that renewed every detail of his room, and rise, and shed his dreams, and make enough fresh coffee for them both, and begin to listen. The outer door downstairs would softly open; there was an alto squeak only she produced from the hinges. Her first steps on the flight of stairs would be inaudible. Her next, stealthily rising toward him, had the breathy lightness of expectation. Her feet would press the top treads firmly, evenly, like piano pedals; an abrasive slither would cross the linoleum hall; and her knock, three blurred beats with an inquisitive pause between the second and third, would sound.

He listened now. The downstairs door opened. In the little skip of silence following the squeak of the hinges, his heart found space to erect a towering certainty, which toppled as the first brutal, masculine steps assaulted the stairs. Still, perhaps she was wearing boots, perhaps in the empty months her manner of mounting had changed, perhaps she was angry, or rigid with determination, or heavy with fright. He noiselessly went to his door, his hand lifted to turn the knob. The footsteps slithered on the linoleum and passed by. He felt relieved. He had lived so long with the vain expectation of her coming that it, the expectation, had become a kind of companion he was afraid of losing. He stared at the wall, dumbstruck by its stupidity. He turned sick of himself, physically sick, so that his arms ached and his stomach fell and the nagging sour smell behind the baseboard seemed the odor of his own decaying body. He returned to the chair and tried to study.

The outer door opened again, delicately this time. His heartbeats timed the silence. He saw her, dressed in blue or green or brown, ascending the stairs toward him, her lips a little parted in the effort of stealth, and her hand, slightly reddened and bony from antiseptic scrubbings, lightly touching the wall for balance. The silence lengthened, lengthened beyond recall, and he forced himself to admit that there was no one on the stairs, that the wind or a child had idly opened the door from outside and let it fall shut. He rose from the chair in a rage; why didn’t she *know*, know how he wanted her now, not in white, but in blue or green or brown? This was the woman he wanted, the woman much like other women, the woman who talked awry in restaurants, who wanted to marry him, the woman who came to him and not the woman, in white, who left. He had accepted her leaving because of the pledge to return she left behind, the clothes that at last he recognized as her essential clothes, the everyday clothes that contained her other costumes, as skin is beneath all cloth and white is the spin of all colors. He had dreaded in marriage the loss of their mornings, their transposition into the shadowy scale of evening. But she had not explained to him that the mornings were a gift, an extravagance on her part which could be curtailed. She had been neglectful not to explain this, and she was wrong now not to know that he, lagging behind her a distance of months, had followed in the steps of her love and now had reached the exact point she had reached when they had last parted, and that she had only to stop, and turn, and take one step up the stairs to meet him. Yes, she was stupid, hasty, and cruel not to know his heart, not to hear the great cry issuing from this room; and this blunt vision of her limitations failed to dull his love but instead dreadfully sharpened it, for love begins in earnest when we love what is limited.

“My nurse,” he whispered aloud, at last putting forth, in conscious competition with the tiny notched sighing of the clock, the shuddering of the refrigerator, and the empty scratches of sound in the stairway and hallway, a sound of his own. This speaking, this invoking her aloud, was the only action he was capable of taking. To seek her out would be to risk the final refusal which the silence withheld. To leave the room would be to abandon the possibility of receiving her visit. Even to install a telephone would be to heap another silence upon the furious silence of the stairs and of the doors. He did nothing. He did nothing all morning but maintain, with the full strength of his scattered mind and attenuated body, an unanswered vigil.

At noon, the day’s reprieve arrived. She could not come now. She would be at work. His strenuous wrestle with her absence could be suspended, and did not need to be resumed until tomorrow morning. Perhaps tomorrow he would be weaker and, therefore, less caring, stronger. He felt that these mornings were aging him; he looked in the mirror for traces of the strange painless pain that punished him, like a punctual masseur, for three hours each day. The mirror, too, was unanswering. If anything were to show, it would be in the eyes, and one’s eyes, self-confronted, lose all expression. His frame slowly relaxed, and ceased to feel his heart as an intruder. Like someone dressing in clothes wildly scattered about on the night before, he could reassemble his presence and leave the room. He could enter the twinkling city, eat, keep appointments, confront people, confident that his outward appearance had not altered, that, just as his body had refused to burst in its fullness before, so now it failed to collapse in its emptiness. Resuming, in part, a student’s interested demeanor, he heard himself talk, give answers, even laugh. He saw, with a double sense of being a fraud and defrauded both, that an existence could be patched together out of afternoons and nights. But his mornings had been destroyed, and the morning of his life taken from him.