# At a Bar in Charlotte Amalie

# John Updike

BLOWFISH with lightbulbs inside their dried skins glowed above the central fortress of brown bottles. The bar was rectangular; customers sat on all four sides. A slim schoolteacherish-looking girl, without much of a tan and with one front tooth slightly overlapping the other, came in, perched on a corner stool, and asked for a daiquiri-on-the-rocks. She wore a yellow halter, turquoise shorts, and white tennis sneakers. The white bartender, who was not visibly malformed, nevertheless moved like a hunchback, with a sideways bias and the scuttling nimbleness peculiar to cripples. He wore a powder-blue polo shirt, and now and then paused to take a rather avid sip from a tall glass containing perhaps orange juice; his face was glazed with sweat and he kept peering toward the outdoors, as if expecting to be relieved of duty. The green sea was turning gray under round pink clouds. A boat dully knocked against the cement wharf, and suddenly the noise had the subtle importance noises in these latitudes assume at night. A member of the steel band, a tall, long-jawed Negro, materialized in the rear of the place, on a shallow shadowy platform where the cut and dented steel drums were stacked. After un-stacking and mounting them, this Negro, who wore a tattered red shirt and held a dead cigarette in the center of his lips, picked up a mallet and experimentally tapped into the air a succession, a cluster, an overlapping cascade of transparent notes that for a moment rendered everyone at the bar silent.

Then a homosexual with a big head turned to the schoolteacherish girl, who had been served, and said, “See my pretty hat?” His head seemed big because his body was small, a boy’s body, knobby and slack and ill-fitted to his veined man’s hands and to his face. His eyes were rather close together, making him seem to concentrate, without rest, upon a disagreeable internal problem, and his lips—which in their curt cut somehow expressed New York City—were too quick, snapping in and out of a grin as if he were trying to occupy both sides of his situation, being both the shameless clown and the aloof, if amused, onlooker. He had been talking about his hat, half to himself, since four o’clock this afternoon, and when he held it out to the girl an eddy of sighs and twisted eyebrows passed through the faces in the yellow darkness around the bar. The hat was a cheap broadweave straw with a bird’s nest of artificial grass set into the crown, a few glass eggs fixed in the nest, and several toy birds suspended on stiff wires above it, as if in flight. “I designed it myself,” he explained. “For the carnival this weekend. Isn’t it marvellously uninhibited?” He glanced around, checking on the size of his audience.

He was well known here. If he had scraped, from the surface of indifference, a few shreds of attention, it was because of the girl. Her coming in here, at this twilight hour, alone, bearing herself with such prim determined carelessness, was odd enough to attract notice, even at a tropical bar, where everything is permitted to happen.

“It’s lovely,” she said, of the hat, and sipped her drink.

“Do you want to put it on? Please try it.”

“I don’t think so, thank you.”

“I designed it myself,” he said, looking around and deciding to make a speech. “That’s the way I am. I just give my ideas away.” He flung up his hands in a gesture of casting away, and a breeze moved in from the street as if to accept his gift. “If I were like other people, I’d make money with my ideas. Money, mo*nnn*ey. It’s excrement, but I love it.” A brief anonymous laugh rose and was borne off by the breeze. The homosexual returned to the girl with a tender voice. “You don’t have to put it on,” he told her. “It’s not really finished. When I get back to my room, where I’ve been meaning to go all day, if that *fiend*”—he pointed at the bartender, who with his slightly frantic deftness was pouring a rum Collins—“would let me go. He says I owe him monnney! When I get back to my room, I’m going to add a few touches, here, and here. A few spangly things, just a few. It’s for the carnival this weekend. Are you down here for the carnival?”

“No,” the girl said. “I’m flying back tomorrow.”

“You should stay for the carnival. It’s wonderfully uninhibited.”

“I’d like to, but I must go back.” Slightly blushing, she lowered her voice and murmured something containing the word “excursion.”

The homosexual slapped the bar. “Forgive me, forgive me, dear Lord above”—he rolled his eyes upward, to the glowing blowfish and the great roaches and tarantulas of straw which decorated the walls—“but I *must* see how my hat looks on you, you’re so pretty.”

He reached out and set the hat with its bright hovering birds on her head. She took another sip of her drink, docilely wearing the hat. A child laughed.

The homosexual’s eyes widened. This unaccustomed expression was painful to look at; it was as if two incisions were being held open by clamps. The child who had laughed was looking straight at him: a bright round face fine-featured as the moon, rising just barely to the level of the bar and topped by hair so fair it was white. The little boy sat between his parents, a man and a woman oddly alike, both wearing white cotton and having stout sun-browned arms, crinkled weather-whipped faces, and irises whose extremely pale blue seemed brittle, baked by days of concentration on a glaring sea. Even their hair matched. The man’s had not been cut in months, except across his forehead, and was salt-bleached in great tufts and spirals, like an unravelling rope of half-dark strands. The woman’s, finer and longer, was upswept into a tumultuous blond crown that had apparently sheltered the roots enough to leave them, for an inch or two, dark. They looked, this husband and wife, like two sexless chieftains of a thickset, seagoing Nordic tribe. As if for contrast, they were accompanied by a gaunt German youth with swarthy skin, watchful eyes, close-cropped hair, and protruding ears. He stood behind and between them, a shadow uniting three luminaries.

The homosexual crouched down on the bar and fiddled his fingers playfully. “Hi,” he said. “Are you laughing at me?”

The child laughed again, a little less spontaneously.

His parents stopped conversing.

“What a gorgeous child,” the homosexual called to them. “He’s so—so *fresh*. So uninhibited. It’s wonderful.” He blinked; truly he did seem dazzled.

The father smiled uneasily toward the wife; the pale creases around his eyes sank into his tan, and his face, still young, settled into what it would become—the toughened, complacent, blind face of an old Scandinavian salt, the face that, pipe in teeth, is mimicked on carved bottle-stoppers.

“No, really,” the homosexual insisted. “He’s darling. You should take him to Hollywood. He’d be a male Shirley Temple.”

The child, his tiny pointed chin lifting in mute delight, looked upward from one to the other of his parents. His mother, in a curious protective motion, slipped from her stool and placed a sandalled foot on the rung of her child’s stool, her tight white skirt riding up and exposing half her thigh. It was thick yet devoid of fat, like the trunk of a smooth-skinned tree.

The father said, “You think?”

“I *think*?” the homosexual echoed eagerly, crouching farther forward and touching his chin to his glass. “I *know*. He’d be a male Shirley Temple. My judgment is infallible. If I was willing to leave all you lovely people and go dig in the dung, I’d be a stinking-rich talent scout living in Beverly Hills.”

The father’s face collapsed deeper into its elderly future. The mother seized her thigh with one hand and ruffled the child’s hair with the other. The dark German boy began to talk to them, as if to draw them back into their radiant privacy. But the homosexual had been stirred. “You know,” he called to the father, “just looking at you I can feel the brine in my face. You both look as if you’ve been on the ocean all of your life.”

“Not quite,” the father said, so tersely it wasn’t heard.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I haven’t been on the sea all my life.”

“You know, I *love* sailing. I love the life of the open sea. It’s so”—his lips balked, rejecting “uninhibited”—“it’s so free, so pure, all that wind, and the waves, and all that jazz. You can just be yourself. No, really. I think it’s wonderful. I love Nature. I used to live in Queens.”

“Where do you live now?” the girl beside him asked, setting his hat on the bar between them.

The homosexual didn’t turn his head, answering as if the sailing couple had asked the question. “I live here,” he called. “In dear old St. Thomas. God’s own beloved country. Do you need a cook on your boat?”

The child tugged at his mother’s waist and pulled her down to whisper something into her ear. She listened and shook her head; a brilliant loop of hair came undone. The father drank from the glass in front of him and in a freshened voice called across, “Not at the moment.”

“I wish you did, I wish to Heaven you did, I’m a beautiful cook, really. I make the *best* omelets. You should see me; I just put in the old eggs and a little bit of milk and a glass of brandy and some of those little green things—what are they called?—chives, I put in the chives and stir until my arm breaks off and it comes out just *won*derful, so light and fluffy. If I cared about money, I’d be a chef in the Waldorf.”

The child’s whispered request seemed to recall the group to itself. The father turned and spoke to the German boy, who, in the instant before bowing his head to listen, threw, the whites of his eyes glimmering, a dark glance at the homosexual. Misunderstanding, the homosexual left his stool and hat and drink and went around the corner of the bar toward them. But, not acknowledging his approach, they lifted the child and walked away toward the rear of the place, where there was a jukebox. Here they paused, their brilliant hair and faces bathed in boxed light.

The homosexual returned to his stool and watched them. His head was thrown back like that of a sailor who has suffered a pang at the sight of land. “Oh dear,” he said aloud, “I can’t decide which I want to have, the man or the woman.”

The schoolteacherish girl sipped her daiquiri, dipping her head quickly, as if into a bitter birdbath. One stool away from her down the bar, there sat a beefy unshaven customer, perhaps thirty years old, drinking a beer and wearing a T-shirt with a ballpoint pen clipped to the center of the sweat-soaked neckline. Squinting intently into space and accenting some inner journey with soft grunts, he seemed a truck driver transported, direct and intact, from the counter of an Iowa roadside diner. Next to him, across a space of empty stools, behind an untouched planter’s punch, sat a very different man of about the same age, a man who, from his brick-red complexion, his high burned forehead, the gallant immobility of his posture, and the striking corruption of his teeth, could only have been English.

Into the space of three stools between them there now entered a dramatic person—tall, gaunt, and sandy. He displayed a decrepit Barrymore profile and a gold ring in one ear. He escorted a squat powdered woman who looked as though she had put on her lipstick by eating it. She carried a dachshund under one arm. The bartender, unsmiling, awkwardly pivoting, asked, “How’s the Baron?”

“Rotten,” the Baron said; and as he eased onto his stool his stiff wide shoulders seemed a huge coat hanger left, out of some savage stubbornness, in his coat. The woman set the dachshund on the bar. When their drinks came, the dog lapped hers, which was a lime rickey. When he tried to lap the Baron’s—a straight Scotch—the man gripped the dachshund’s thirstily wagging rump, snarled “Damn alcoholic,” and sent him skidding down the bar. The dog righted himself and sniffed the truck driver’s beer; a placid human paw softly closed over the mouth of the glass, blocking the animal’s tongue. His nails clicking and slipping on the polished bar, the dog returned to his mistress and curled up at her elbow like a pocketbook. The girl at the corner shyly peeked at the man beside her, but he had resumed staring into space. The pen fixed at his throat had the quality of a threat, of a scar.

The blond family returned from having put a quarter into the jukebox, which played “Loco Motion,” by Little Eva; “Limbo Rock,” by Chubby Checker; and “Unchain My Heart,” by Ray Charles. The music, like an infusion of letters from home, froze the people at the bar into silence. Beyond the overhang that sheltered the tables, night dominated. The bar lit up a section of pavement where pedestrians flitted like skittish actors from one wing of darkness into the other. The swish of traffic on the airport road had a liquid depth. The riding lights of boats by the wharf bobbed up and down, and a little hard half-moon rummaged for its reflection in the slippery sea. The Baron muttered to the painted old woman an angry and long story in which the obscene expressions were peculiarly emphasized, so that only they hung distinct in the air, the connecting threads inaudible. The Englishman at last moved his forearm and lowered the level of his planter’s punch by a fraction of an inch, making a stoic face afterward, as if the sweetness had hurt his teeth. The homosexual, nettled by the attention received by the drinking dachshund, took off his hat and addressed the ceiling of the bar as if it were God. “Hey there, Great White Father,” he said. “You haven’t been very good to me this month. I know You love me—how could You help it, I’m so beautiful—but I haven’t seen any money coming out of the sky. I mean, really, You put us down here in the manure and we need it to live, like. You know? I mean, don’t get too uninhibited up there. Huh?” He listened, and the Baron, undistracted, set another blue word burning in the hushed air. “That’s O.K.,” the homosexual continued. “You’ve kept the sun shining, and I appreciate it. You just keep the sun shining, Man, and don’t send me back to Queens.” At prayer’s end, he put the hat on his head and looked around, his curt lips pursed defiantly.

Five Negroes, uncostumed, in motley clothes and as various in size as their instruments, had assembled on the shadowy platform, kidding and giggling back and forth and teasing the air with rapid, stop-and-start gusts of tuning up. Abruptly they began to play. The ping-pong, the highest pan, announced itself with four harsh solo notes, and on the fifth stroke the slightly deeper guitar pans, the yet deeper cello pans, and the bass boom, which was two entire forty-four-gallon oil drums, all at once fell into the tune, and everything—cut and peened drums, rubber-tipped sticks, tattered shirtsleeves, bobbing heads, munching jaws, a frightened-looking little black child whipping a triangle as fast as he could—was in motion, in flight. The band became a great loose-jointed bird feathered in clashing, rippling bells. It played “My Basket,” and then, with hardly a break, “Marengo Jenny,” “How You Come to Get Wet?,” and “Madame Dracula.” Nobody danced. It was early, and the real tourists, the college students and Bethlehem Steel executives and Westchester surgeons, had not yet come down from dinner in the hills to sit at the tables. There was a small dance floor on one side of the bar. A young Negro appeared here. He wore canary-yellow trousers and a candy-striped jersey with a boat neck and three-quarter sleeves. He had a broad, hopeful face and an athletic, wedge-shaped back. From his vaguely agitated air of responsibility, he seemed to be associated with the establishment. He asked the schoolteacherish girl, who looked alone and lost, to dance; but she, with a pained smile and a nervous dip of her head into her second daiquiri, refused. The young Negro stood stymied on the dance floor, clothed only, it seemed, in music and embarrassment, his pale palms dangling foolishly. When the band, in a final plangent burst cut short as if with a knife, stopped, he went to the leader, the long-jawed red shirt on the ping-pong, and said, “Ey, mon, le peo-*ple* wan I bet ‘Yel*low* Bird.’ ” He phrased it, as the West Indian accent phrases all statements, like a question.

The leader took offense. He answered deliberately, unintelligibly, as if, the music still ringing in the pan of his skull, he were softly tapping out a melody with his tongue. The man on the bass boom, a coarse thick-lipped mulatto in a blue work shirt unbuttoned down to his navel, joined in the argument and gave the young man a light push that caused him to step backward off the platform. The bass-boom man growled, and the strip of hairy cocoa skin his shirt exposed puffed up like a rooster’s throat. No one had danced; the band was defensive and irritable. The leader, biting the butt of his cigarette, rattled a venomous toneless tattoo on the rim of his ping-pong. Then the shadow manning the cello pans—he had a shaved head, and was the oldest of them—spoke an unheard word, and all the Negroes, including the boy with the wedge-shaped back, broke into disjointed laughter.

When the band resumed playing, they began with “Yellow Bird”—played flat, at a grudging, slow tempo. The young Negro approached the blonde mother of the little boy. She came with him into the center of the floor and lifted her fat fair arms. They danced delicately, sleepily, the preening shuffle of the mambo, her backside switching in its tight white dress, his broad face shining as his lips silently mouthed the words: *Ye-ell-o-oh bi-ird, up in the tree so high, ye-ell-o-oh bi-ird, you sit alone like I*. Her thick waist seemed at home in the wide clasp of his hand.

When the song finished, he bowed thank you and she returned to her family by the bar and, as if sighing, let down her hair. Apparently it had been held by one pin; she pulled this pin, and the fluffy sun-bleached crown on the top of her head cascaded down her back in a loosening stream, and she looked, with her weather-pinched face, like a negative of a witch, or what relates to witches as angels relate to devils. The little boy, as if his heart were climbing the golden rope she had let down, whispered up to her, and she, after bowing her head to listen, glanced up at the homosexual, who was complaining to the bartender that his vodka-and-tonic had gone watery.

“You owe me,” the bartender said, “a dollar fifty, and if you let the drink sit there hour after hour, damn right the ice’ll melt.”

“I don’t have a dollar fifty,” was the answer. “I have washed my hands, forever and ever, amen, of filthy lucre. People want me to get a job but I won’t; that’s the way I am. It’s a matter of principle with me. Why should I work all day for a pittance and starve when I can do nothing whatsoever and starve anyway?”

Now the whole blond family was staring at him fascinated. The glow of their faces caught the corner of his eye, and he turned toward them inquisitively; memory of the snub they had given him made his expression shy.

“I want one dollar and fifty cents from you,” the bartender insisted, with unconvincing emphasis; his anxious sweat and obscurely warped posture seemed that of a warden trapped in his own prison, among inmates he feared. He gulped some orange from his glass and looked toward the outdoors for relief. Pale square clouds rested above the sea, filtering stars. Laughter like spray was wafted from a party on a yacht.

The homosexual called, “Really, he is the most cunning little boy I have ever seen in all my *life*. In Hollywood he could be a male Shirley Temple, honestly, and when he grows up a little he could be a male what’s-her-name—oh, what *was* her name? Jane Withers. I have a beautiful memory. If I cared, I could go back to New York and get on a quiz show and make a million dollars.”

The German boy spoke for the group. “He vunts—your hatt.”

“Does he? Does he really? The little angel wants to wear my hat. I designed it myself for the carnival this weekend.” He left his stool, scrambled around the corner, set the hat with its glade of decoration squarely on the child’s spherical head, and, surprisingly, knelt on the floor. “Come on,” he said, “come on, darling. Get on my shoulders. Let’s go for a ride.”

The father looked a question at his wife, shrugged, and lifted his son onto the stranger’s shoulders. The birds on their wires bobbed unsteadily, and fear flickered not only in the child’s face but in the grown face to which he clung. The homosexual, straightening up, seemed startled that the child was a real weight. Then, like a frail monster overburdened with two large heads, one on top of the other and the upper one sprouting a halo of birds, he began to jog around the rectangular bar, his shaved legs looking stringy and bony in their shorts. The steel band broke into a pachanga. Some tourist families had come down from the hills to occupy the tables, and the athletic young Negro, whose flesh seemed akin to rubber, successfully invited a studiously tanned girl with orange hair, a beauty, to dance. She had long green eyes and thin lips painted paler than her skin, and an oval of nakedness displayed her long brown collarbones. The Baron cursed and yanked his own lady onto the floor; as they danced, the dachshund nipped worriedly at their stumbling feet. The Baron kicked the dog away, and in doing so turned his head, so that, to the dizzy little boy riding by, the gold ring in his ear flashed like the ring on a merry-go-round. A stately bald man, obviously a North American doctor, rose, and his wife, a midget whose Coppertone face was wrinkled like a walnut, rose to dance with him. The homosexual’s shoulders hurt. He galloped one last lap around the bar and lifted the child back onto the stool. The airy loss of pressure around his neck led him to exhale breathlessly into the bright round face framed by straw, “You know, Mark Twain wrote a lovely book *just* about you.” He took the hat from the child’s head and replaced it on his own. The child, having misunderstood the bargain, burst into tears, and soon his mother carried him from the bar and into the night, their blond heads vanishing.

The dancing gathered strength. The floor became crowded. From her high vantage at the corner of the bar, the schoolteacherish girl studied with downcast eyes the dancing feet. They seemed to be gently tamping smooth a surface that was too hot to touch for more than an instant. Some females, of both races, had removed their shoes; their feet looked ugly and predatory, flickering, spread-toed, in and out of shadows and flashes of cloth. When the music stopped, black hands came and laid, on the spot of floor where her eyes were resting, two boards hairy with upright rusty nails. A spotlight was focused on them. The band launched into a fierce limbo. The young Negro with the handsome rubbery back leaped, nearly naked, into the light. His body was twitching in rhythm, he was waving two flaming torches, and he was clad in knit swimming trunks and orange streamers representing, she supposed, Caribbean slave dress. His eyes shut, he thrust the torches alternately into his mouth and spat out flame. Indifferent applause rippled through the tables.

The Baron, drunker than anyone had suspected, pushed off from the bar and, as the young Negro lay down on a board of nails and stroked the skin of his chest with the sticks of fire, lay down beside him and kicked his trousered legs high in parody. No one dared laugh, the Baron’s face was so impassive and rapt. The young Negro, his back resting on the nails, held one torch at arm’s length, so that the flame rested on the Baron’s coat lapel and started a few sparks there; but the Baron writhed on obliviously, and the smoldering threads winked out. When the Negro stood, now clearly shaken, and with a great mock-primitive grimace leaped on one board of nails with his bare feet, the Baron leaped in his sandals on the other, and through sandy eyelashes blindly peered into the surrounding darkness of applause, his earring glinting, his shoulders still seeming to have a coat hanger in them. Two black waiters, nervous as deer, ventured into the spotlight and seized his upraised arms; as they led him out of the light, the tall figure of the white man, gasping as if he had surfaced after a shipwreck, yet expressed, in profile, an incorrigible dignity. There was murmuring at the tables as the tourists wondered if this had been part of the act.

The music pitched into an even fiercer tempo. The young Negro, handing away his torches, was given a cloth sack, which he dropped on the floor. It fell open to reveal a greenish heap of smashed bottles. He trod on the heap with both feet. He got down and rolled in it as a dog rolls ecstatically in the rotten corpse of a woodchuck. He rested his back on the pillow of shards and the heavy mulatto left the bass boom and stood on his chest. There was applause. The mulatto jumped off and walked away. The Negro got up on his knees, cupped a glittering quantity of broken glass in his palms, and scrubbed his face with it. When he stood to take the applause, the girl observed that his back, which gleamed, heaving, a foot from her eyes, indeed did bear a few small fresh cuts. The applause died, the music halted, and the bright lights went on before the pseudo-slave, hugging his nail-boards and bag of glass, had reached the haven of the door behind the platform. As he passed among them, the members of the steel band cackled.

Now there was an intermission. The bartender, his hands trembling and his eyes watering, it seemed, on the edge of tears, scuttled back and forth mixing a new wave of drinks. More tourists drifted in, and the families containing adolescents began to leave. The traffic on the airport road had diminished, and the bumping of the boats on the wharf, beneath the moon that had lost its reflection, regained importance. The people on the decks of these boats could see the windows burning in the dry hills above Charlotte Amalie, lights spread through the middle of the night sky like a constellation about to collide with our planet but held back, perpetually poised in the just-bearable distance, by that elusive refusal implicit in tropical time, which like the soft air seems to consist entirely of circles. Within the bar, the German boy wandered over and spoke to the homosexual, who looked up from under the brim of his antic hat with alert lips and no longer preoccupied eyes, all business. The German boy put two dollar bills on the bar, to cover the unpaid drink. The very English-appearing man left his place behind the undiminishing planter’s punch, sauntered around the bar, and commenced a conversation with the now deserted Nordic father; the Englishman’s first words betrayed a drawling American accent. The Baron laid his handsome head on the bar and fell asleep. The dachshund licked his face, because it smelled of alcohol. The woman slapped the dog’s nose. The beefy man abruptly pulled the pen from the neck of his T-shirt, removed the cardboard coaster from under his beer, and wrote something on it, something very brief—one word, or a number. It was as if he had at last received a message from the ghostly trucking concern that had misplaced him here. The ping-pong sounded; the music resumed. The young Negro, changed out of costume back into his yellow pants and candy-striped boat-necked shirt, returned. Flexing his back and planting his palms on his hips, he again asked the strange girl at the corner of the bar to dance. This time, with a smile that revealed her slightly overlapping front teeth, she accepted.