# The Red-Herring Theory

# John Updike

THE PARTY WAS OVER. Their friends had come, shuffled themselves, been reshuffled, worn thin with the evening and then, papery post-midnight presences, had conjured themselves out the door. The Maples were left with each other and a profusion of cigarette butts and emptyish glasses. The dishes were stacked dirty in the kitchen, the children slept in innocence upstairs. Still, the couple, with the hysterical after-energy of duty done, refused to go to bed but instead sat in a living room grown suddenly hollow and huge.

‘What messy people,’ Joan said, perched upright in a director’s chair of natural wood and green canvas. ‘Grinding Fritos into a shag rug. They’re so *sloppy*.’ Richard saw that she was in a judgmental mood; her pronouncements, when she was in this mood, fascinated him.

‘Isn’t that how *we* act,’ he asked, sprawled on the off-white sofa, its pillows battered by a succcession of bodies, ‘when we go out?’ The seats they had chosen placed Joan higher, and displayed to his view the admirable clean line of her jaw.

‘Not at all,’ she said positively. ‘We clean up what we spill. We always leave together, too.’

‘That *was* odd,’ Richard agreed. ‘Do you think Jim was sick, or mad?’

‘Maybe he was so mad it made him sick.’

‘Was he mad at *me*?’

‘Well,’ Joan said, ‘you *did* keep dancing with her, even after he put on his overcoat.’

‘Surely a suburban man,’ was the languid reply of her husband, who in his adolescence had seen a number of Mr and Mrs North movies, ‘has the right to dance with his mistress.’

Joan’s reply was enviably firm: ‘Marlene is not your mistress. She’s your red herring.’

‘My red herring?’ The unforeseen phrase tinted Marlene’s skin exotically; again, she was in his arms, but slipperier, a mermaid, a scaly smelly merperson. She had been loaded to the gills with perfume.

‘Sure,’ Joan said. ‘The properly equipped suburban man, as you call him, has a wife, a mistress, and a red herring. The red herring may have been his mistress once, or she may become one in the future, but he’s not sleeping with her now. You can tell, because in public they act as though they do.’

Richard leaned into another depressed pillow, protesting, ‘That’s too Machiavellian to be real. That’s decadent, sweetie. Maybe it was a mistake, to bring you out here; we should have stayed on West Thirteenth Street. Remember how the policemen used to gallop by on horses in the snow?’

‘They did that once. Fifteen years ago. The schools were impossible. You couldn’t park the car.’

‘Jesus,’ he agreed, ‘remember the time I parked it in a lot and a roof-mending job on the building next to it spilled tar all over the windshield? It still makes me furious.’ But remembering it made him happy.

‘There you are,’ Joan agreed, ‘we’re stuck,’ meaning the suburbs. ‘Want a little nightcap?’

‘My God, no. How can you stand any more liquor? Do you think I should call Jim up and apologize?’

‘Don’t be silly. You might interrupt something.’

‘I might?’ His perfumed merperson, descaled, in another’s arms? The thought was chilly.

‘It’s possible. Marlene didn’t seem at all fazed when he went out, she went right on being the life of the party.’

Richard shifted back to the first pillow and changed the subject. ‘Poor Ruth,’ he said, ‘didn’t seem to have a very good time.’

Joan rose, regal in her high-waisted, floor-length, powder-blue party dress, and seized the brandy bottle on the piano; its long neck became a sceptre in her hand. She took up a dirty snifter, tossed its residue into the fireplace, listened to the sizzle, and poured herself a tawny, chortling slug. ‘Poor Ruth,’ she repeated carefully, seating herself again in the director’s chair.

‘Of course,’ Richard amplified, ‘why *should* she have a good time, with that jerk for a husband?’

‘Jerry’s not such a jerk,’ Joan said. ‘He’s a lovely dancer, for one thing. A good athlete. There’s a lot you could learn from him.’

‘No doubt.’ He thought the subject should be changed back again. ‘If Marlene’s just my red herring,’ he asked, ‘why did she dance with me so long?’

‘Maybe you’re hers. We can have red herrings too, you know. Women’s lib.’

‘Then who’s Marlene really seeing?’

‘Jerry?’

‘Impossible.’

‘Why are you so sure?’

‘Because he’s such a jerk. All he can do is talk stocks, throw the football, and dance.’ Every time, that fall, playing touch football, he had caught a pass thrown from Jerry’s hand, Richard had felt guilt tag him.

Joan’s smile sealed upon a swallow of brandy. ‘A jerk,’ she said, ‘can be a fish.’

‘There are fish in your game too?’

The brandy produced eloquence. ‘What are these boring messy parties for except fishing? If you’ve caught your fish, you go to see him. Or her. If you haven’t yet, you go in hopes you will. If you don’t fish at all, like the Donnelsons, you go out of fascination, to see who’s catching what. And we need them, too. Like fish need water to swim in.’

‘We? Whose fish are you? You make that brandy look awful good.’

Joan rose and brought the bottle to him, because, Richard figured, she could pour herself another splash on the way, and because she knew she looked better standing up in her queenly dress than sitting down. Sitting down, she looked pregnant. ‘First,’ she responded, having served him and reseated herself, while the front of her waist puffed up in a nostalgic simulation of childbearing, ‘let’s figure out, whose red herring am I?’

‘You *were* Mack’s,’ Richard ventured, ‘but that seems to have cooled. He was all over Eleanor tonight; do you think they’re going to get remarried?’

‘And waste all those lawyers’ fees?’

‘Jerry’s,’ he tried. ‘You danced with him twice, on and on.’ Irate, truth seeming to dawn, Richard sat up and pointed accusingly. ‘You’re that jerk’s red herring!’

‘I am not,’ Joan replied calmly. ‘Jerry and I talked a long time, but it was about you and Ruth.’

‘Oh. And what did you decide?’

‘That the two of you weren’t doing anything really.’

‘How nice.’ His relief blended with annoyance at her complacent underestimation.

‘If there *were* something going on,’ Joan continued, ‘you’d speak to each other at least *once* at a party, for appearances’ sake. As is, you just stare. The question is, are you working up to something? I think so, he doesn’t. He’s very sure of her.’

‘He would be. What a jerk.’

His tone, too vehement, seemed to offend her, in her queenly blue dress. ‘Let’s talk about *me*,’ Joan said. ‘I’m tired of talking about you.’

‘What *about* you? Are you fishing?’

‘Do I act it?’

He thought. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘you’re a flirt, but not a fisherwoman.’

‘You don’t think I have the guts?’

‘You have the guts,’ he said, ‘but not the — the what? The *edge*. Every time you feel an edge working up, you hit yourself with another slug of brandy and dull it. Like now. This could be a pretty sexy talk; but by the time we get upstairs you’ll be dead. Hey. It just occurred to me why Jim left. It wasn’t my dancing with Marlene at all, nobody gives a damn who their wife dances with. It was *your* dancing so long with Jerry. Jim is your fish, and you teased him with your red herring.’

‘Don’t let my theory run away with you.’

‘It makes sense. You used to be Mack’s fish, and now you’re his red herring, while he makes up to Eleanor, or is Eleanor *his* red herring, and — did you notice how much time he spent talking to Linda Donnelson?’

Joan’s face froze, for the briefest moment: the way a gust of wind will suddenly flatten choppy water. ‘Linda? Don’t be silly. They were arguing about low-income housing.’

Why was she defensive? Had she gone back to Mack? Richard doubted this; their affair had cooled as soon as Mack got divorced. It was the mention of the Donnelsons. ‘For that matter,’ he ventured, ‘you don’t seem to think Sam is as boring as you used to.’

‘He *is* boring. I talked to him because I was the hostess and nobody else would.’

‘He does have a gorgeous body,’ Richard admitted, as if she had asserted this. ‘Once you get below his wooden head.’

‘Is it so wooden?’

‘I don’t know, is it? You’re the one who’s tapping it.’

‘I’m not tapping anything. I’m sitting here looking at you and thinking I don’t like you very much.’

‘That time Sam took us sailing,’ Richard went on, ‘I was struck by what a terrific muscular back he has with his shirt off. Why did he ask us sailing? He knows I have hydrophobia. Whereas you turned out to be a regular little salt, fluttering up there with the jib sheet. How is it, in a boat? Anything like a waterbed? God, sweetie, you have your nerve, bringing up the Donnelsons and telling me what innocent *aqua pura* they were. So Sam’s your fish. Landed or not. I still can’t figure out who your red herring is, you have so many.’

Her silence frightened him; he became again a little boy begging his mother to speak to him, to rescue him from drowning in the blood-deep currents of her moods, of her secrets. ‘Tell me some more,’ he begged Joan, ‘about why you don’t like me. It’s music to my ears.’

‘You’re cruel,’ she pronounced, the brandy glass resting in her hand like a symbolic orb of power, ‘and you’re greedy.’

‘Now tell me why you like me. Tell me why we shouldn’t get a divorce.’

‘I hate your ego,’ she said, ‘and our sex is lousy, but I’ve never been lonely with you. I’ve never for an instant felt alone when you were in the room.’ Tears made her blink, and close her mouth.

He blinked also, out of weariness. ‘Well that’s a pretty weak endorsement. It won’t sell much of the product in Peoria.’

‘Is that what we’re trying to do? Sell the product in Peoria?’

‘It sure as hell isn’t selling very well here. Except to red herrings and poor fish.’

His attack flustered her, routed her from her throne. ‘You shouldn’t get angry,’ she said, standing, ‘when I try to talk. It doesn’t happen that often.’ She began to collect glasses, and to carry them toward the kitchen.

‘Thank God for that. You’re appalling.’

‘What is it that offends you? That I’m even a little bit alive?’

‘A live for other people, but not for me.’

‘You sounded just like Ruth, saying that. You’ve even caught her self-pity. Come on. Help me clean up this mess.’

‘A mess it is,’ he admitted. But clearing it away, arranging all these receptacles in the racks of the dishwasher and then shepherding them back, spotless, to their allotted spaces in the cupboard, felt like another layer of confusion, a cover-up. Richard stayed on the sofa, trying to see through the tangle to the light. Joan was on to Ruth; that space was gone. There remained one area of opportunity, one way to beat the system; its simplicity made him smile. Sleep with your red herring.