# Sublimating

# John Updike

THE MAPLES AGREED that, since sex was the only sore point in their marriage, they should give it up: sex, not the marriage, which was eighteen years old and stretched back to a horizon where even their birth pangs, with a pang, seemed to merge. A week went by. On Saturday, Richard brought home in a little paper bag a large raw round cabbage. Joan asked, ‘What is *that*?’

‘It’s just a cabbage.’

‘What am I supposed to *do* with it?’ Her irritability gratified him.

‘You don’t have to do *anything* with it. I saw Mack Dennis go into the A & P and went in to talk to him about the new environment commission, whether they weren’t muscling in on the conservation committee, and then I had to buy something to get out through the checkout counter, so I bought this cabbage. It was an impulse. You know what an impulse is.’ Rubbing it in. ‘When I was a kid,’ he went on, ‘we always used to have a head of cabbage around; you could cut a piece off to nibble instead of a candy. The hearts were best. They really burned your mouth.’

‘O.K., *O.K.’* Joan turned her back and resumed washing dishes. ‘Well, I don’t know where you’re going to put it; since Judith turned vegetarian the refrigerator’s already so full of vegetables I could cry’

Her turning her back aroused him; it usually did. He went closer and thrust the cabbage between her face and the sink. ‘*Look* at it, darley. Isn’t it beautiful? It’s so perfect.’ He was only partly teasing; he had found himself, in the A & P, ravished by the glory of the pyramided cabbages, the mute and glossy beauty that had waited ages for him to rediscover it. Not since preadolescence had his senses opened so innocently wide: the pure sphericity, the shy cellar odor, the cannonball heft. He chose, not the largest cabbage, but the roundest, the most ideal, and carried it naked in his hand to the checkout counter, where the girl, with a flicker of surprise, dressed it in a paper bag and charged him thirty-three cents. As he drove the mile home, the secret sphere beside him in the seat seemed a hole he had drilled back into reality. And now, cutting a slice from one pale cheek, he marvelled across the years at the miracle of the wound, at the tender compaction of the leaves, each tuned to its curve as tightly as a guitar string. The taste was blander than his childhood memory of it, but the texture was delicious in his mouth.

Bean, their baby, ten, came into the kitchen. ‘What is Daddy eating?’ she asked, looking into the empty bag for cookies. She knew Daddy as a snack-sneaker.

‘Daddy bought himself a cabbage,’ Joan told her.

The child looked at her father with eyes in which amusement had been prepared. There was a serious warmth that Mommy and animals, especially horses, gave off, and everything else had the coolness of comedy. ‘That was silly,’ she said.

‘Nothing silly about it,’ Richard said. ‘Have a bite.’ He offered her the cabbage as if it were an apple. He envisioned inside her round head leaves and leaves of female psychology, packed so snugly the wrinkles dovetailed.

Bean made a spitting face and harshly laughed. ‘That’s nasty,’ she said. Bolder, brighter-eyed, flirting: ‘*You’re* nasty.’ Trying it out.

Hurt, Richard said to her, ‘I don’t like you either. I just like my cabbage.’ And he kissed the cool pale dense vegetable once, twice, on the cheek; Bean gurgled in astonishment.

Her back still turned, Joan continued from the sink, ‘If you *had* to buy something, I wish you’d remembered Calgonite. I’ve been doing the dishes by hand for days.’

‘Remember it yourself,’ he said airily. ‘Where’s the Saran Wrap for my cabbage?’ But as the week wore on, the cabbage withered; the crisp planar wound of each slice by the next day had browned and loosened. Stubbornly loyal, Richard cut and nibbled his slow way to the heart, which burned on his tongue so sharply that his taste buds even in their adult dullness were not disappointed; he remembered how it had been, the oilcloth-covered table where his grandmother used to ‘snitz’ cabbage into strings for sauerkraut and give him the leftover raw hearts for a snack. How they used to burn his tender mouth! His eyes would water with the delicious pain.

He did not buy another cabbage, once the first was eaten; analogously, he never returned to a mistress, once Joan had discovered and mocked her. Their eyes, that is, had married and merged to three, and in the middle, shared one, her dry female-to-female clarity would always oust his romantic mists.

Her lovers, on the other hand, he never discovered while she had them. Months or even years later she would present an affair to him complete, self-packaged as nicely as a cabbage, the man remarried or moved to Seattle, her own wounds licked in secrecy and long healed. So he knew, coming home one evening and detecting a roseate afterglow in her face, that he would discover only some new layer of innocence. Nevertheless he asked, ‘What have *you* been up to today?’

‘Same old grind. After school I drove Judith to her dance lesson, Bean to the riding stable, Dickie to the driving range.’

‘Where was John?’

‘He stayed home with me and said it was boring. I told him to go build something, so he’s building a guillotine in the cellar; he says the sixth grade is studying revolution this term.’

‘What’s he using for a blade?’

‘He flattened an old snow shovel he says he can get sharp enough.’

Richard could hear the child banging and whistling below him. ‘Jesus, he better not lose a finger.’ His thoughts flicked from the finger to himself to his wife’s even white teeth to the fact that two weeks had passed since they gave up sex.

Casually she unfolded her secret. ‘One fun thing, though.’

‘You’re taking up yoga again.’

‘Don’t be silly; I was never anything to him. No. There’s an automatic car wash opened up downtown, behind the pizza place. You put three quarters in and stay in the car and it just happens. It’s hilarious.’

‘*What* happens?’

‘Oh, you know. Soap, huge brushes that come whirling around. It really does quite a good job. Afterwards, there’s a little hose you can put a dime in to vacuum the inside.’

‘I think this is very sinister. The people who are always washing their cars are the same people who are against abortion. Furthermore, it’s bad for it. The dirt protects the paint.’

‘It needed it. We’re living in the mud now.’

Last fall, they had moved to an old farmhouse surrounded by vegetation that had been allowed to grow wild. This spring, they attacked the tangle of Nature around them with ominously different styles. Joan raked away dead twigs beneath bushes and pruned timidly, as if she were giving her boys a haircut. Richard scorned such pampering and attacked the problem at the root, or near the root. He wrestled vines from the barn roof, shingles popping and flying; he clipped the barberries down to yellow stubble; he began to prune some overweening yews by the front door and was unable to stop until each branch became a stump. The yews, a rare Japanese variety, had pink soft wood maddeningly like flesh. For days thereafter, the stumps bled amber.

The entire family was shocked, especially the two boys, who had improvised a fort in the cavity under the yews. Richard defended himself: ‘It was them or me. I couldn’t get in my own front door.’

‘They’ll never grow again, Dad,’ Dickie told him. ‘You didn’t leave any green. There can’t be any photosynthesis.’ The boy’s own eyes were green; he kept brushing back his hair from them, with that nervous lady-like gesture of his long-haired generation.

‘Good,’ Richard stated. He lifted his pruning clippers, which had an elbow hinge for extra strength, and asked, ‘How about a haircut?’

Dickie’s eyes rounded with fright and he backed closer to his brother, who, though younger, had even longer hair. They looked like two chunky girls, blocking the front door. ‘Or why don’t you both go down to the cellar and stick your heads in the guillotine?’ Richard suggested. In a few powerful motions he mutilated a flowering trumpet vine. He had a vision, of right angles, clean clapboards, unclouded windows, level and transparent spaces from which the organic — the impudent, importunate, unceasingly encroaching organic — had been finally scoured.

‘Daddy’s upset about something else, not about your hair,’ Joan explained to Dickie and John at dinner. As the pact wore on, the family gathered more closely about her; even the cats, he noticed, hesitated to take scraps from his hand.

‘What about, then?’ Judith asked, looking up from her omelette. She was sixteen and Richard’s only ally.

Joan answered, ‘Something grown-up.’ Her older daughter studied her for a moment, alertly, and Richard held his breath, thinking she might *see*. Female to female. The truth. The translucent vista of scoured space that was in Joan like a crystal tunnel.

But the girl was too young and, sensing an enemy, attacked her reliable old target, Dickie. ‘*You*,’ she said. ‘I don’t ever see *you* trying to help Daddy, all you do is make Mommy drive you to golf courses and ski mountains.’

‘Yeah? What about *you*,’ he responded weakly, beaten before he started, ‘making Mommy cook two meals all the time because you’re too *pure* to sully your lips with *an*imal matter.’

‘At least when I’m here I try to help; I don’t just sit around reading books about dumb Billy Caster.’

‘Casper,’ Richard and Dickie said in unison.

Judith rose to her well-filled height; her bell-bottom hip-hugging Levi’s dropped an inch lower and exposed a mingled strip of silken underpants and pearly belly. ‘I think it’s a*tro*cious for some people like us to have too many bushes and people in the ghetto don’t even have a weed to look at, they have to go up on their rooftops to breathe. It’s *true*, Dickie; don’t make that face!’

Dickie was squinting in pain; he found his sister’s body painful. ‘The young sociologist,’ he said, ‘flaunting her charms.’

‘You don’t even know what a sociologist is,’ she told him, tossing her head. Waves of fleshly agitation rippled down toward her toes. ‘You are a very *spoiled* and *self*ish and *lim*ited person.’

‘Puh puh, big mature,’ was all he could say, poor little boy overwhelmed by this blind blooming.

Judith had become an optical illusion in which they all saw different things: Dickie saw a threat, Joan saw herself of twenty-five years ago, Bean saw another large warmth-source that, unlike horses, could read her a bedtime story. John, bless him, saw nothing, or, dimly, an old pal receding. Richard couldn’t look. In the evening, when Joan was putting the others to bed, Judith would roll around on the sofa while he tried to read in the chair opposite. ‘Look, Dad. See my stretch exercises.’ He was reading *My Million-Dollar Shots*, by Billy Casper. The body must be coiled, tension should be felt in the back muscles and along the left leg at top of backswing. Illustrations, with arrows. The body on the sofa was twisting into lithe knots; Judith was double-jointed and her prowess at yoga may have been why Joan stopped doing it, outshone. Richard glanced up and saw his daughter arched like a staple, her hands gripping her ankles; a glossy bulge of supple belly held a navel at its acme. At the top of the backswing, forearm and back of the left hand should form a straight line. He tried it; it felt awkward. He was a born wrist-collapser. Judith watched him pondering his own wrist and giggled; then she kept giggling, insistently, flirting, trying it out. ‘Daddy’s a narcissist.’ In the edge of his vision she seemed to be tickling herself and flicking her hair in circles.

‘*Judith!*’ He had not spoken to her so sharply since, as a toddler, she had spilled sugar all over the kitchen floor. In apology he added, ‘You are driving me crazy.’

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The fourth week, he went to New York, on business. When he returned, Joan told him during their kitchen drink, ‘This afternoon, everybody was being so cranky; you off, the weather lousy, I piled them all into the car, everybody except Judith; she’s spending the night at Margaret Merino’s —’

‘You *let* her? With that little tart and her druggy crowd? Are there going to be boys there?’

‘I didn’t ask. I hope so.’

‘Live vicariously, huh?’

He wondered if he could punch her in the face and at the same time grab the glass in her hand so it wouldn’t break. It was from a honeymoon set of turquoise Mexican glass of which only three were left. With their shared eye she saw his calculations and her face went stony. He could break his fist on that face. ‘Are you going to let me finish my story?’

‘Sure. *Dîtes-moi*, Scheherazade.’

‘— and we went to the car wash. Hecuba was hilarious, she kept barking and chasing the brushes around and around the car trying to defend us. It took her three rotations to figure out that if it went one way it would be coming back the other. Everybody absolutely howled; we had Danny Vetter in the car with us, and one of Bean’s horsy friends; it was a real orgy’ Her face was pink, recalling.

‘That is a truly disgusting story. Speaking of disgusting, I did something strange in New York.’

‘You slept with a prostitute.’

Almost. I went to a blue movie.’

‘How scary for you, darley.’

‘Well, it was. Wednesday morning I woke up early and didn’t have any appointment until eleven so I wandered over to Forty-second Street, you know, with this innocent morning light on everything, and these little narrow places were already open. So — can you stand this?’

‘Sure. All I’ve heard all week are children’s complaints.’

‘I paid three bucks and went in. It was totally dark. Like a fun house at a fairground. Except for this very bright-pink couple up on the screen. I could hear people breathing but not see anything. Every time I tried to slide into a row I kept sticking my thumb into somebody’s eye. But nobody groaned or protested. It was like those bodies frozen in whatever circle it was of Hell. Finally I found a seat and sat down and after a while I could see it was all men, asleep. At least most of them seemed to be asleep. And they were spaced so no two touched; but even at this hour, the place was half full. Of motionless men.’ He felt her disappointment; he hadn’t conveyed the fairy-tale magic of the experience: the darkness absolute as lead, the undercurrent of snoring as from a single dragon, the tidy way the men had spaced themselves, like checkers on a board. And then how he had found a blank square, had jumped himself, as it were, into it, and joined humanity in stunned witness of its own process of perpetuation.

Joan asked, ‘How was the movie?’

‘Awful. Exasperating. You begin to think entirely in technical terms: camera position, mike boom. And the poor cunts, God, how they work. Apparently to get a job in a blue movie a man has to be, A, blond, and, B, impotent.’

‘Yes,’ Joan said and turned her back, as if to conceal a train of thought. ‘We have to go to dinner tonight with the new Dennises.’ Mack Dennis had remarried, a woman much like Eleanor only slightly younger and, the Maples agreed, not nearly as nice. ‘They’ll keep us up forever. But maybe tomorrow,’ Joan was going on, as if to herself, timidly, ‘after the kids go their separate ways, if you’d like to hang around …’

‘No,’ he took pleasure in saying. ‘I’m determined to play golf. Thursday afternoon one of the accounts took me out to Long Island and even with borrowed clubs I was hitting the drives a mile. I think I’m on to something; it’s all up here.’ He showed her the top of his backswing, the stiff left wrist. ‘I must have been getting twenty extra yards.’ He swung his empty arms down and through.

‘See,’ Joan said, gamely sharing his triumph, ‘you’re sublimating.’

In the car to the Dennises’, he asked her, ‘How is it?’

‘It’s quite wonderful, in a way. It’s as if my senses are jammed permanently open. I feel all one with Nature. The jonquils are out behind the shed and I just looked at them and cried. They were so beautiful I couldn’t stand it. I can’t keep myself indoors, all I want to do is rake and prune and push little heaps of stones around.’

‘You know,’ he told her sternly, ‘the lawn isn’t just some kind of carpet to keep sweeping, you have to make some decisions. Those lilacs, for instance, are full of dead wood.’

‘*Don’t*,’ Joan whimpered, and cried, as darkness streamed by, torn by headlights.

In bed after the Dennises (it was nearly two; they were numb on brandy; Mack had monologued about conservation and Mrs Dennis about interior decoration, redoing ‘her’ house, which the Maples still thought of as Eleanor’s), Joan confessed to Richard, ‘I keep having this little vision — it comes to me anywhere, in the middle of sunshine — of me dead.’

‘Dead of what?’

‘I don’t know that, all I know is that I’m dead and it doesn’t much matter.’

‘Not even to the children?’

‘For a day or two. But everybody manages.’

‘Sweetie.’ He repressed his strong impulse to turn and touch her. He explained, ‘It’s part of being one with Nature.’

‘I suppose.’

‘I have it very differently. I keep having this funeral fantasy. How full the church will be, what Spence will say about me in his sermon, who’ll be there.’ Specifically, whether the women he has loved will come and weep with Joan; in the image of this, their combined grief at his eternal denial of himself to them, he glimpsed a satisfaction for which the transient satisfactions of the living flesh were a flawed and feeble prelude — merely the backswing. In death, he felt, as he floated on his back in bed, he would grow to his true size.

Joan with their third eye may have sensed his thoughts; where usually she would roll over and turn her sumptuous back, whether as provocation or withdrawal it was up to him to decide, now she lay paralyzed, parallel to him. ‘I suppose,’ she offered, ‘in a way, it’s cleansing. I mean, you think of all that energy that went into the Crusades.’

‘Yes, I dare say,’ Richard agreed, unconvinced, ‘we may be on to something.’