# Nakedness

# John Updike

‘OH, LOOK,’ Joan Maple said, in her voice of delight. ‘We’re being invaded!’

Richard Maple lifted his head from the sand.

Another couple, younger, was walking down the beach like a pair of creatures, tawny, maned, their movements made stately by their invisible effort to control self-consciousness. One had to look hard to see that they were naked. A summer’s frequentation of the nudist section up the beach, around the point from the bourgeois, bathing-suited section where the Maples lay with their children and their books and their towels and tubes of lotion, had bestowed upon the bodies of this other couple the smooth pelt of an even tan. The sexual signs so large in our interior mythology, the breasts and pubic patches, melted to almost nothing in the middle distance, in the sun. Even the young man’s penis seemed incidental. And the young woman appeared a lesser version of the male — the same taut, magnetic stride, the same disturbingly generic arrangement of limbs, abdomen, torso, and skull.

Richard suppressed a grunt. Silence attended the two nudes, pushing out from their advance like wavelets up the packed sand into the costumed people, away from the unnoticing commotion and self-absorbed sparkle of the sea.

*‘Well!’:* a woman’s exclamation, from underneath an umbrella, blew down the beach like a sandwich wrapper. One old man, his dwindled legs linked to a barrel chest by boyish trunks of plaid nylon, stood up militantly, helplessly, drowning in this assault, making an uplifted gesture between that of hailing a taxi and shaking a fist. Richard’s own feelings, he noticed, were hysterically turbulent: a certain political admiration grappled with an immediate sense of social threat; pleasure in the sight of the female was swept under by hatred for the male, whose ally she was publicly declaring herself to be; pleasure in the sight of the male fought specific focus on that superadded, boneless bit of him, that monkeyish footnote to the godlike thorax; and envy of their youth and boldness and beauty lost itself in an awareness of his own body that washed over him so vividly he involuntarily glanced about for concealment.

His wife, buxom and pleased and liberal, said, ‘They must be stoned.’

Abruptly, having paraded several hundred yards, the naked couple turned and ran. The girl, especially, became ridiculous, her buttocks outthrust in the ungainly effort of retreat, her flesh jouncing heavily as she raced to keep up with her mate. He was putting space between them; his hair lifted in a slow spume against the sea’s electric blue.

Heads turned as at a tennis match; the spectators saw what had made them run — a policeman walking crabwise off the end of the boardwalk. His uniform made him, too, representative of a species. But as he passed, his black shoes treading the sand in measured pursuit, he was seen as also young, his mustache golden beneath the sad-shaped mirrors of his sunglasses, his arms swinging athletic and brown from his short blue sleeves. Beneath his uniform, for all they knew, his skin wore another uninterrupted tan.

‘My God,’ Richard said softly. ‘He’s one of *them*.’

‘He is a pretty young pig,’ Joan stated with complacent quickness.

Her finding a phrase she so much liked irritated Richard, who had been groping for some paradox, some wordless sadness. The Maples found themselves much together this vacation. One daughter was living with a man, one son had a job, the other son was at a tennis camp, and their baby, Bean, hated her nickname and, at thirteen, was made so uncomfortable by her parents she contrived daily excuses to avoid being with them. In their reduced family they were too exposed to one another; the child saw them, Richard feared, more clearly than he and Joan saw themselves. Now, using their freedom from parenting, he suggested, as in college when they were courting he might have suggested that they leave the library and go to a movie, ‘Let’s follow him.’

The policeman was a receding blue dot. ‘Let’s,’ Joan agreed, standing promptly, sand raining from her, the gay alacrity of her acceptance perhaps forced but the lustrous volume of her body, and her gait beside his, which he unthinkingly matched, and the weight of warm sun on his shoulders as they walked, real enough — real enough, Richard thought, for now.

The bathing-suited section thinned behind them. As they turned the point, they saw naked bodies: freckled redheads with slack and milky bellies; swart brunettes standing upright as if to hold their nut-hard faces closer to the sun; sleeping men, their testicles like dropped fruit slowly rotting; a row of buttocks like the scallop on a doily; a bearded man doing yoga on his head, the fork of his legs appearing to implore the sky. Among these Boschian apparitions the policeman moved gently, cumbersome in his belt and gun, whispering, nearly touching the naked listeners, who nodded and began, singly and in groups, to put on their clothes. The couple who had trespassed, inviting this counter-invasion, could not be distinguished from the numerous naked others; all were being punished.

Joan went up to a trio, two boys and a girl, as they struggled into their worn jeans, their widths of leather and sleeveless vests, their sandals and strange soft hats. She asked them, ‘Are you being kicked off?’

The boys straightened and gazed at her — her conservative bikini, her pleasant plumpness, her sympathetic smile — and said nothing. The penis of one boy, Richard noticed, hung heavy a few inches from her hand. Joan turned and returned to her husband’s side.

‘What did they tell you?’ he asked.

‘Nothing. They just stared at me. Like I was a nincompoop.’

‘There have been two revolutions in the last ten years,’ he told her. ‘One, women learned to say “fuck.” Two, the oppressed learned to despise their sympathizers.’

He added, ‘Or maybe they just resented being approached when they were putting on their pants. It’s a touchy moment, for males.’

The nudists, paradoxically, brought more clothing to the beach than the bourgeoisie; they distinguished themselves, walking up the beach to the point, by being dressed head to toe, in denim and felt, as if they had strolled straight from the urban core of the counterculture. Now, as the young cop moved among them like a sorrowing angel, they bent and huddled in the obsequious poses of redressing.

‘My God,’ Joan said, ‘it’s Masaccio’s *Expulsion from Paradise*.’ And Richard felt her heart in the fatty casing of her body plump up, pleased with this link, satisfied to have demonstrated once again to herself the relevance of a humanistic education to modern experience.

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All that afternoon, as, returned from the beach, he pushed a balky lawn mower through the wiry grass around their rented house, Richard thought about nakedness. He thought of Adam and Eve (‘Who told thee that thou wast naked?’) and of Noah beheld naked by Ham, and of Susanna and the elders. He thought of himself as a child, having a sunbath on the second-story porch with his mother, who had been, in her provincial way, an avant-gardist, a health faddist. Yellow jackets would come visit, the porch was so warm. An hour seemed forever; his embarrassment penetrated and stretched every minute. His mother’s skin was a pale landscape on the rim of his vision; he didn’t look at it, any more than he bothered to look at the hills enclosing their little West Virginia town, which he assumed he would never leave.

He recalled a remark of Rodin’s, that a woman undressing was like the sun piercing through clouds. The afternoon’s gathering cloudiness slid shadows across the lawn, burnishing the wiry grass. He had once loved a woman who had slept beside a mirror. In her bed the first time, he glanced to his right and was startled to see them both, reflected naked. His legs and hers looked prodigiously long, parallel. She must have felt his attention leave her, for she turned her head; duplicated in the mirror, her face appeared beneath the duplicate of his. The mirror was an arm’s length from the bed. What fascinated him in it was not her body but his own — its length, its glow, its hair, its parallel toes so marvellously removed from his small, startled, sheepish head.

There had been, he remembered, a noise downstairs. Their eyes had widened into one another’s, the mirror forgotten. He whispered, ‘What is it?’ Milkmen, mailmen, the dog, the furnace.

She offered, ‘The wind?’

‘It sounded like a door opening.’

As they listened again, her breath fanned his mouth. A footstep distinctly betrayed itself beneath them. At the same moment as he tugged to pull the sheets over their heads, she sharply flung them aside. She disengaged herself from him, lifting her leg like the near figure in Renoir’s *Bathers*. He was alone in the mirror; the mirror had become a screaming witness to the fact that he was where he should not be (‘Dirt is matter in the wrong place,’ his mother used to say) and that he was in no condition for fight or flight. He was jutting out, ‘sticking up at you like a hatrack,’ as the phrase went through Molly Bloom’s mind. He had hidden on the sunporch with his bunched clothes clutched to his aching front.

He squatted now to cut the stubborn tufts by the boat shed with the hand clippers, and imperfectly remembered a quotation from one of the Japanese masters of *shungā*, to the effect that the phallus in these pictures was exaggerated because if it were drawn in its natural size it would be negligible.

She had returned, his lover, still naked, saying, ‘Nothing.’ She had walked naked through her own downstairs, a trespasser from Eden, past chairs and prints and lamps, eclipsing them, unafraid to encounter a burglar, a milkman, a husband; and her nakedness, returning, had been as calm and broad as that of Titian’s Venus, flooding him from within like a swallowed sun.

He thought of Titian’s Venus, wringing her hair with two firm hands. He thought of Manet’s Olympia, of Goya’s Maja. Of shamelessness. He thought of Edna Pontellier, Kate Chopin’s heroine, walking in the last year of that most buttoned-up of centuries down to the Gulf and, before swimming to her death, casting off all her clothes. *How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious!*

He remembered himself a month ago, coming alone to this same house, this house into whose lightless, damp cellar he was easing, step by step, the balky mower, its duty done. He had volunteered to come alone and open up the house, to test it; it was a new rental for them. Joan had assented easily; there was something in her, these days, that also wanted to be alone. Half the stores on the island were not yet open for the summer. He had bought some days’ worth of meals, and lived in rooms of a profound chastity and silence. One morning he had walked through a mile of huckleberry and wild grape to a pond. Its rim of beach was scarcely a stride wide; only the turds and shed feathers of wild swans testified to other presences. The swans, suspended in the sun-irradiated mist upon the pond’s surface, seemed gods to him, perfect and infinitely removed. Not a house, not a car looked down from the hills of sand and scrub that enclosed the pond. Such pure emptiness under the sky seemed an opportunity it would be sacrilegious to waste. Richard took off his clothes, all; he sat on a rough warm rock, in the pose of Rodin’s *Thinker*. He stood and at the water’s edge became a prophet, a baptist. Ripples of light reflected from the water onto his legs. He yearned to do something transcendent, something obscene; he stretched his arms and could not touch the sky. The sun intensified. As mist burned from the surface of the pond, the swans stirred, flapping their wings in aloof, Olympian tumult. For a second, sex dropped from him and he seemed indeed the divinely shaped center of a concentric Creation; his very skin felt beautiful — no, he felt beauty rippling upon it, as if the Creation were loving him, licking him. Then, the next second, glancing down, he saw himself to be less than sublimely alone, for dozens of busy coppery bodies, ticks, were crawling up through the hair of his legs, as happy in his giant warmth as he was in the warmth of the sun.

The sky was an even gray now, weathered silver like the shingles on this island. As he went into the house to reward himself with a drink, he remembered, from an old sociology text, a nineteenth-century American farmer’s boasting that though he had sired eleven children he had never seen his wife’s body naked. And from another book, perhaps by John Gunther, the assertion, of some port in West Africa, that this was the last city on the coast where a young woman could walk naked down the main street without attracting attention. And from an old *Time* review, years ago, revolutions ago, of the Brigitte Bardot picture that for a few frames displayed her, from behind, bare from head to toe: *Time* had quipped that, though the movie had a naked woman in it, so did most American homes around eleven o’clock at night.

Eleven o’clock. The Maples have been out to dinner; Bean is spending the night with a friend. Their bedroom within this house is white and breezy, white even to the bureaus and chairs, and the ceiling so low their shadows seem to rest upon their heads.

Joan stands at the foot of the bed and kicks off her shoes. Her face, foreshortened in the act of looking down, appears to pout as she undoes the snaps on her skirt and lets the zipper fling into view a white *V* of slip. She lets her skirt drop, retrieves it with a foot, places it in a drawer. Then the jersey lifts, decapitating her and gathering her hair into a cloud, a fist, that collapses when her face is again revealed, preoccupied. A head-toss, profiled. Auto lights from the road caress the house and then forget. An unexpected sequence: Joan pulls down her underpants in a quick shimmy before — with two hands, arms crossed — pulling up her slip. Above her waist, the bunched nylon snags; she halts in the pose of Michelangelo’s slave, of Munch’s madonna, of Ingres’s urn-bearer, seen from the front, unbarbered. The slip unsnags, the snakeskin slides, the process continues. With a squint of effort she uncouples the snaps at her back and flips the bra toward the hamper in the hall. Her half-brown breasts bounce. Toward the bed she says, in her voice of displeasure, ‘Don’t you have something better to do? Than watch me?’

Richard has been lying on the bed half dressed, a strip-show audience of one, holding his applause. He answers truthfully, ‘No.’

He jumps up and finishes undressing, his shadow whirling about his head. The two of them stand close, as close as at the beach when she had returned from being rejected by the young persons, a girl and two boys, one boy’s heavy penis hanging inches from her hand. *Like I was a nincompoop*. Her husband had not been sympathetic. They are back on the beach; she is remembering. Again he feels her heart in the fatty casing of her body plump up. She looks at him, her eyes blue as a morning sea, and smiles. ‘*No*,’ Joan says, in complacent firm denial. Richard feels thrilled, invaded. This nakedness is new to them.