# Gesturing

# John Updike

SHE TOLD HIM with a little gesture he had never seen her use before. Joan had called from the station, having lunched with her lover, Richard guessed. He had been spending the Saturday baby-sitting for his own children, in the house the Maples had once shared. Her new Volvo was handier in the driveway, but for several minutes it refused to go into first gear for him. By the time he had reached the center of town, she had walked down the main street and up the hill to the green. It was September, leafy and warm, yet with a crystal chill on things, an uncanny clarity. Even from a distance they smiled to see one another. She opened the door and seated herself, fastening the safety belt to silence its chastening buzz. Her face was rosy from her walk; her city clothes looked like a costume; she carried a small package or two, token of her ‘shopping.’ Richard tried to pull a U-turn on the narrow street, and in the long moment of his halting and groping for reverse gear she told him. ‘Darley,’ she said, and, oddly, tentatively, soundlessly, tapped the fingers of one hand into the palm of the other, a gesture between a child’s clap of glee and an adult’s signal for attention, ‘I’ve decided to kick you out. I’m going to ask you to leave town.’

Abruptly full, his heart thumped; it was what he wanted. ‘O.K.,’ he said carefully. ‘If you think you can manage.’ He glanced sideways at her face to see if she meant it; he could not believe she did. A red, white, and blue mail truck that had braked to a stop behind them tapped its horn, more reminder than rebuke; the Maples were known in the town. They had lived here most of their married life.

Richard found reverse, backed up, and completed the turn. The car, so new and stiff, in motion felt high and light, as if it too had just been vaporized in her little playful clap. ‘Things are stagnant,’ she explained, ‘stuck; we’re not going anywhere.’

‘I will not give her up,’ he interposed.

‘Don’t tell me, you’ve told me.’

‘Nor do I see you giving him up.’

‘I would if you asked. Are you asking?’

‘No. Horrors. He’s all I’ve got.’

‘Well, then. Go where you want; I think Boston would be most fun for the kids to visit. And the least boring for you.’

‘I agree. When do you see this happening?’ Her profile, in the side of her vision, felt brittle, about to break if he said a wrong word, too rough a word. He was holding his breath, trying to stay up, high and light, like the car. They went over the bump this side of the old stone bridge; cigarette smoke jarred loose from Joan’s face.

‘As soon as you can find a place,’ she said. ‘Next week. Is that too soon?’

‘Probably.’

‘Is this too sad? Do I seem brutal to you?’

‘No, you seem wonderful, very gentle and just, as always. It’s right. It’s just something I couldn’t do myself. How can you possibly live without me in town?’

In the edge of his vision her face turned; he turned to see, and her expression was mischievous, brave, flushed. They must have had wine at lunch. ‘Easy,’ Joan said. He knew it was a bluff, a brave gesture; she was begging for reprieve. But he held silent, he refused to argue. This way, he had her pride on his side.

The curves of the road poured by, mailboxes, trees some of which were already scorched by the turn of the year. He asked, ‘Is this your idea, or his?’

‘Mine. It came to me on the train. All Andy said was, I seemed to be feeding you all the time.’ In the weeks since their summer of separated vacations, Richard had been sleeping in a borrowed seaside shack two miles from their home; he tried to cook there, but each evening, as the nights grew shorter, it seemed easier, and kinder to the children, to eat the dinner Joan had cooked. He was used to her cooking; indeed, his body, every cell, was composed of her cooking. Dinner would lead to a post-dinner drink, while the children (two were off at school, two were still homebound) plodded through their homework or stared at television, and drinking would lead to talking, confidences, harsh words, maudlin tears, and an occasional uxorious collapse upward, into bed. She was right; it was not healthy, or progressive. The twenty years were by, when it would have been convenient to love one another.

He found the apartment in Boston on the second day of hunting. The real-estate agent had red hair, a round bottom, and a mask of makeup worn as if to conceal her youth. Richard felt happy and scared, going up and down stairs behind her. Wearier of him than he was of her, she fidgeted the key into this lock, bucked the door open with her shoulder, and made her little open-handed gesture of helpless display.

The floor was not the usual wall-to-wall shag or splintered wood, but black and white tile, like the floor in a Vermeer; he glanced to the window, saw the skyscraper, and knew that this would do. The skyscraper, for years suspended in a famous state of incompletion, was a beautiful disaster, famous because it was a disaster (glass kept falling from it) and disastrous because it was beautiful: the architect had had a vision. He had dreamed of an invisible building, though immense; the glass was meant to reflect the sky and the old low brick skyline of Boston, and to melt into the sky. Instead, the windows of mirroring glass kept falling to the street, and were replaced by ugly opacities of black plywood. Yet enough reflecting surface remained to give an impression, through the wavery old window of this sudden apartment, of huge blueness, a vertical cousin to the horizontal huge blueness of the sea that Richard awoke to each morning, in the now bone-deep morning chill of his unheated shack. He said to the redhead, ‘Fine,’ and her charcoal eyebrows lifted. His hands trembled as he signed the lease, having written ‘Sep’ in the space for marital status. From a drugstore he phoned the news, not to his wife, whom it would sadden, but to his mistress, equally far away. ‘Well,’ he told her in an accusing voice, ‘I found one. I signed the lease. Incredible. In the middle of all this fine print there was the one simple sentence, “There shall be no waterbeds.”’

‘You sound so shaky.’

‘I feel I’ve given birth to a black hole.’

‘Don’t do it, if you don’t want to.’ From the way Ruth’s voice paused and faded he imagined she was reaching for a cigarette, or an ashtray, settling herself to a session of lover-babying.

‘I do want to. She wants me to. We all want me to. Even the children are turned on. Or pretend to be.’

She ignored the ‘pretend.’ ‘Describe it to me.’

All he could remember was the floor, and the view of the blue disaster with reflected clouds drifting across its face. And the redhead. She had told him where to shop for food, where to do his laundry. He would have laundry?

‘It sounds nice,’ was Ruth’s remote response, when he had finished saying what he could. Two people, one of them a sweating black mailman, were waiting to use the phone booth. He hated the city already, its crowding, its hunger.

‘What sounds nice about it?’ he snapped.

‘Are you so upset? Don’t do it if you don’t want to.’

‘Stop *say*ing that.’ It was a tedious formality both observed, the pretense that they were free, within each of their collapsing marriages, to do as they pleased; guilt avoidance was the game, and Ruth had grown expert at it. Her words often seemed not real words but blank counters, phrases of a prescribed etiquette. Whereas his wife’s words always opened inward, transparent with meaning.

‘What else can I say,’ Ruth asked, ‘except that I love you?’ And at its far end the phone sharply sighed. He could picture the gesture: she had turned her face away from the mouthpiece and forcefully exhaled, in that way she had, expressive of exasperation even when she felt none, of exhaling and simultaneously stubbing out a cigarette smoked not halfway down its length, so it crumpled under her impatient fingers like an angry sentence thought better of. Her conspicuous unthriftiness pained him. All waste pained him. He wanted abruptly to hang up, but saw that, too, as a wasteful gesture, and hung on.

Alone in his apartment, he discovered himself to be a neat and thrifty housekeeper. When a woman left, he would promptly set about restoring his bachelor order, emptying the ashtrays which, if the visitor had been Ruth, brimmed with long pale bodies prematurely extinguished and, if Joan, with butts so short as to be scarcely more than filters. Neither woman, it somehow pleased him to observe, ever made more than a gesture toward cleaning up — the bed a wreck, the dishes dirty, each of his three ashtrays (one glass, one pottery, and one a tin cookie-jar lid) systematically touched, like the bases in baseball. Emptying them, he would smile at Ruth’s messy morgue, or at Joan’s nest of filters, discreet as white pebbles in a bowl of narcissi. When he chastised Ruth for stubbing out cigarettes still so long, she pointed out, of course, with her beautiful, unblinking assumption of her own primary worth, how much better it was for *her*, for her lungs, to kill the cigarette early; and of course she was right, better other-destructive than self-destructive. Ruth was love, she was life, that was why he loved her. Yet Joan’s compulsive economy, her discreet death wish, was as dearly familiar to him as her tiny repressed handwriting and the tight curls of her dark pubic hair, so Richard smiled emptying her ashtrays also. His smile was a gesture without an audience. He, who had originated his act among parents and grandparents, siblings and pets, and who had developed it for a public of schoolmates and teachers, and who had carried it to new refinements before an initially rapt audience of his own children, could not in solitude stop performing. He had engendered a companion of sorts, an admirer from afar — the blue skyscraper. He felt it with him all the time.

Blue, it showed greener than the sky. For a time Richard was puzzled, why the clouds reflected in it drifted in the same direction as the clouds behind it. With an effort of spatial imagination he perceived that a mirror does not reverse our motion, though it does transpose our ears, and gives our mouths a tweak, so that the face even of a loved one looks unfamiliar and ugly when seen in a mirror, the way she — queer thought! — always sees it. He saw that a mirror posed in its midst would not affect the motion of an army; and often half a reflected cloud matched the half of another beyond the building’s edge, moving as one, pierced by a jet trail as though by Cupid’s arrow. The disaster sat light on the city’s heart. At night, it showed as a dim row of little lights, as if a slender ship were sailing the sky, and during a rain or fog it vanished entirely, while the brick chimney pots and ironstone steeples in Richard’s foreground swarthily intensified their substance. Even unseen, it was there; so Richard himself, his soul, was always there. He tried to analyze the logic of window replacement, as revealed in the patterns of gap and glass. He detected no logic, just the slow-motion labor of invisible workers, emptying and filling cells of glass with the brainlessness of bees. If he watched for many minutes, he might see, like the condensation of a dew-drop, a blank space go glassy, and reflective, and greenish-blue. Days passed before he realized that, on the old glass near his nose, the wavery panes of his own window, ghostly previous tenants armed with diamonds had scratched initials, names, dates, and, cut deepest and whitest of all, the touching, comical vow, incised in two trisyllabic lines,

With this ring

I thee wed

What a transparent wealth of previous lives overlay a city’s present joy! As he walked the streets his own happiness surprised him. He had expected to be sad, guilty, bored. Instead, his days were snugly filled with his lists, his quests for food and hardware, his encounters with such problematical wife-substitutes as the Laundromat, where students pored over Hesse and picked at their chins while their clothes tumbled in circular fall, and where young black housewives hummed as they folded white linen. What an unexpected pleasure, walking home in the dark hugging to himself clean clothes hot as fresh bread, past the bow windows of Back Bay glowing like display cases. He felt sober and exhilarated and justified at the hour when in the suburbs, rumpled from the commute, he would be into his hurried second pre-dinner drink. He liked the bringing home of food, the tautological satisfaction of cooking a meal and then eating it all, as the radio fed Bach or Bechet into his ears and a book gazed open-faced from the reading stand he had bought; he liked the odd orderly game of consuming before food spoiled and drinking before milk soured. He liked the way airplanes roamed the brown night sky, a second, thinner city laid upon this one, and the way police sirens sang, scooping up some disaster not his. It could not last, such happiness. It was an interim, a holiday. But an oddly clean and just one, rectilinear, dignified, though marred by gaps of sudden fear and disorientation. Each hour had to be scheduled lest he fall through. He moved like a waterbug, like a skipping stone, upon the glassy tense surface of his new life. He walked everywhere. Once he walked to the base of the blue skyscraper, his companion and witness. It was hideous. Heavily planked and chicken-wired tunnels, guarded by barking policemen, protected pedestrians from falling glass, and the owners of the building, already millions in the hole, from more lawsuits. Trestles and trucks jammed the cacophonous area. The lower floors were solid plywood, of a Stygian black; the building, so lovely in air, had tangled mucky roots. Richard avoided walking that way again.

When Ruth visited, they played a game, of washing — scouring, with a Brillo Pad — one white square of the Vermeer floor, so eventually it would all appear clean. The black squares they ignored. Naked, scrubbing, Ruth seemed on her knees a plump little steed, long hair swinging, soft breasts swaying in rhythm to her energetic circular strokes. Behind, her pubic hair, uncurly and fair, made a kind of nether mane. So lovably strange, she rarely was allowed to clean more than one square. Time, carefully regulated when he was alone, sped for them, and vanished. There seemed time to talk only at the end, her hand on the door. She asked, ‘Isn’t that building amazing, with the sunset in it?’

‘I love that building. And it loves me.’

‘No. It’s me who loves you.’

‘Can’t you share?’

‘No.’

She felt possessive about the apartment; when he told her Joan had been there, too, and, just for ‘fun,’ had slept with him, her husband, Ruth wailed into the telephone. ‘In *our* bed?’

‘In my bed,’ he said, with uncharacteristic firmness.

‘In your bed,’ she conceded, her voice husky as a sleepy child’s. When the conversation finally ended, his mistress sufficiently soothed, he had to go lean his vision against his inanimate, giant friend, dimming to mauve on one side, still cerulean on the other, faintly streaked with reflections of high cirrus. It spoke to him, as the gaze of a dumb beast speaks, of beauty and suffering, of a simplicity that must perish, of time. Evening would soften its shade to slate; night would envelop its sides. Richard’s focus shortened, and he read, with irritation, for the hundredth time, that impudent, pious marring, that bit of litany, etched bright by the sun’s fading fire.

With this ring

I thee wed

Ruth, months ago, had removed her wedding ring. Coming here to embark with him upon an overnight trip, she wore on that naked finger, as a reluctant concession to imposture, an inherited diamond ring. When she held her hand in the sunlight by the window, a planetary system of rainbows wheeled about the room and signalled, he imagined, to the skyscraper. In the hotel in New York, she confided again her indignation at losing her name in the false assumption of his.

‘It’s just a convenience,’ he told her. ‘A gesture.’

‘But I *like* who I am now,’ she protested. That was, indeed, her central jewel, infrangible and bright: she liked who she was.

In Manhattan they had gone separate ways and, returning before him, she had asked at the hotel desk for the room key by number. The clerk asked her her name. It was a policy. He would not give the key to a number.

‘And what did you tell him your name was?’ Richard asked, in this pause of her story.

In her pause and opaque blue stare, he saw re-created her hesitation when challenged by the clerk. Also, she had been, before her marriage, a second-grade teacher, and Richard saw now the manner — prim, wide-eyed, and commanding — with which she must have stood before the blackboard and confronted those roomfuls of children. ‘I told him Maple.’

Richard had smiled. ‘That sounds right.’

Taking Joan out to dinner felt illicit. She suggested it, for ‘fun,’ at the end of one of the children’s Sundays. He had been two months in Boston, new habits had replaced old, and it was tempting to leave their children, who were bored and found it easier to be bored by television than by this bossy visitor. ‘Stop telling me you’re bored,’ he had scolded John, the most docile of his children, and the one he felt guiltiest about. ‘Fourteen is *supposed* to be a boring age. When I was fourteen, I lay around reading science fiction. You lie around looking at *Kung Fu*. At least I was learning to read.’

‘It’s good,’ John protested, his adolescent voice cracking in fear of being distracted from an especially vivid piece of slow-motion *tai chi*. Richard, when living here, had watched the program with him often enough to know that it was, in a sense, good; the hero’s Oriental passivity, relieved by spurts of mystical violence, was insinuating into the child a system of ethics, just as Richard had taken ideals of behavior from dime movies and comic books — coolness from Bogart, debonair recklessness from Errol Flynn, duality and deceit from Superman.

He dropped to one knee beside the sofa where the boy, his upper lip fuzzy and his eyebrows manly dark, stoically gazed into the transcendent flickering; Richard’s own voice nearly cracked, asking, ‘Would it be less boring if Dad still lived here?’

‘No-*oh*‘: the answer was instantaneous and impatient, as if the question had been anticipated. Did the boy mean it? His eyes did not for an instant glance sideways, perhaps out of fear of betraying himself, perhaps out of genuine boredom with grownups and their gestures. On television, satisfyingly, gestures killed. Richard rose from his supplicant position, relieved to hear Joan coming down the stairs. She was dressed to go out, in the snug black dress with the scalloped neckline, and a collar of Mexican silver. He was wary. He must be wary. They had had it. They must have had it.

Yet the cocktails, and the seafood, and the wine displaced his wariness; he heard himself saying, to the so familiar and so strange face across the table, ‘She’s lovely, and loves me, you know’ — he felt embarrassed, like a son suddenly aware that his mother, though politely attentive, is indifferent to the urgency of an athletic contest being described — ‘but she does spell everything out, and wants everything spelled out to her. It’s like being back in the second grade. And the worst thing is, for all this explaining, for all this glorious fucking, she’s still not real to me, the way — you are.’ His voice did break; he had gone too far.

Joan put her left hand, still bearing their wedding ring, flat on the tablecloth in a sensible, level gesture. ‘She will be,’ she promised. ‘It’s a matter of time.’

The old pattern was still the one visible to the world. The waitress, who had taught their children in Sunday school, greeted them as if their marriage were unbroken; they ate in this restaurant three or four times a year, and were on schedule. They had known the ginger-haired contractor who had built it, this mock-antique wing, a dozen years ago, and then left town, bankrupt but oddly cheerful. His memory hovered between the beams. Another couple, older than the Maples — the husband had once worked with Richard on a town committee — came up to their booth beaming, jollying, in that obligatory American way. Did they know? It didn’t much matter, in this nation of temporary arrangements. The Maples jollied back as one, and tumbled loose only when the older couple moved away. Joan gazed after their backs. ‘I wonder what they have,’ she asked, ‘that we didn’t.’

‘Maybe they had less,’ Richard said, ‘so they didn’t expect more.’

‘That’s too easy.’ She was a shade resistant to his veiled compliments; he was grateful. Please resist.

He asked, ‘How do you think the kids are doing? John seemed withdrawn.’

‘That’s how he is. Stop picking at him.’

‘I just don’t want him to think he has to be your little husband. That house feels huge now.’

‘You’re telling me.’

‘I’m sorry.’ He was; he put his hands palms up on the table.

‘Isn’t it amazing,’ Joan said, ‘how a full bottle of wine isn’t enough for two people any more?’

‘Should I order another bottle?’ He was dismayed, secretly: the waste.

She saw this, and said, ‘No. Just give me half of what’s in your glass.’

‘You can have it all.’ He poured.

She said, ‘So your fucking is really glorious?’

He was embarrassed by the remark now, and feared it set a distasteful trend. As with Ruth there was an etiquette of independent adultery, so with Joan some code of separation must be maintained. ‘It usually is,’ he told her, ‘between people who aren’t married.’

‘Is dat right, white man?’ A swallow of his wine inside her, Joan began to swell with impending hilarity. She leaned as close as the table would permit. ‘You must *promise*’ — a gesture went with ‘promise,’ a protesting little splaying of her hands — ‘never to tell this to anybody, not even Ruth.’

‘Maybe you shouldn’t tell me. In fact, don’t.’ He understood why she had been laconic up to now; she had been wanting to talk about her lover, holding him warm within her like a baby. She was going to betray him. ‘Please don’t,’ Richard said.

‘Don’t be such a prig. You’re the only person I can talk to, it doesn’t mean a thing.’

‘That’s what you said about our going to bed in my apartment.’

‘Did she mind?’

‘Incredibly.’

Joan laughed, and Richard was struck, for the thousandth time, by the perfection of her teeth, even and rounded and white, bared by her lips as if in proof of a perfect skull, an immaculate soul. Her glee whirled her to a kind of heaven as she confided stories about herself and Andy — how he and a motel manageress had quarrelled over the lack of towels in a room taken for the afternoon, how he fell asleep for exactly seven minutes each time after making love. Richard had known Andy for years, a slender swarthy specialist in corporation law, himself divorced, though professionally engaged in the finicking arrangement of giant mergers. A fussy dresser, a churchman, he brought to many occasions an undue dignity and perhaps had been more attracted to Joan’s surface glaze, her New England cool, than the mischievous imps underneath. ‘My psychiatrist thinks Andy was symbiotic with you, and now that you’re gone, I can see him as absurd.’

‘He’s not absurd. He’s good, loyal, handsome, prosperous. He tithes. He has a twelve handicap. He loves you.’

‘He protects you from me, you mean. His buttons! — we have to allow a half-hour afterwards for him to do up all his buttons. If they made four-piece suits, he’d wear them. And he washes — he washes *ev*erything, every time.’

‘Stop,’ Richard begged. ‘Stop telling me all this.’

But she was giddy amid the spinning mirrors of her betrayals, her face so flushed and aquiver the waitress sympathetically giggled, pouring the Maples their coffee. Joan’s face was pink as a peony, her eyes a blue pale as ice, almost transparent. He saw through her words to what she was saying — that these lovers, however we love them, are not us, are not sacred as reality is sacred. We are reality. We have made children. We gave each other our young bodies. We promised to grow old together.

Joan described an incident in her house, once theirs, when the plumber unexpectedly arrived. Richard had to laugh with her; that house’s plumbing problems were an old joke, an ongoing saga. ‘The back-door bell rang, Mr Kelly stomped right in, you know how the kitchen echoes in the bedroom, we had *had* it.’ She looked, to see if her meaning was clear. He nodded. Her eyes sparkled. She emphasized, of the knock, ‘Just at the *very* moment,’ and, with a gesture akin to the gentle clap in the car a world ago, drew with one fingertip a *v* in the air, as if beginning to write ‘very.’ The motion was eager, shy, exquisite, diffident, trusting: he saw all its meanings and knew that she would never stop gesturing within him, never; though a decree come between them, even death, her gestures would endure, cut into glass.