# Divorcing: a Fragment

# John Updike

RICHARD MAPLE WONDERED, Can even dying be worse than this? His wife sat crouched on what had been their bed, telling him, between sobs, of her state of mind, which was suicidal, depressive, beaten. They had been living apart for a year and a half, and the time had achieved nothing, no scar tissue had formed, her body was a great unhealed wound crying, *Comeback*.

She was growing older; the skin of her face, as she bowed her head to cry, puckered and dripped in little dry points below her eyes, at the corners of her mouth. He was moved, as by beauty. Unthinkingly, she had clasped her hands in her lap, her hands white against the black flannel skirt; with that yoga-performing flexibility of hers, that age had not yet taken from her, she had made herself compact, into a grieving ball, as if about to be shot from a cannon. ‘I’m sorry’ she was apologizing, ‘I don’t *want* to feel this way, I want to be cheerful and gutsy and flip about it, this is ridiculous. Even the children —’

‘Especially the children,’ he said. ‘They’re good sports.’

‘And I’m not, huh?’ Joan said, in a voice a shade less hopeless, brightened by her aptitude for fair appraisal. ‘I am in some ways. It’s just, just’ — the points of skin, the tears of flesh, sharpened — ‘I wake up every morning reciting reasons to myself why I shouldn’t jump in the river. You don’t know what it’s like.’

She was, as always, right: he didn’t. He imagined nothing, thinking of her jumping in the river, but how cold the water would be, and how heavy her black flannel skirt would become. She was a strong smooth swimmer and the river was not deep. ‘Well do you know what *I* felt like,’ he said, ‘lying beside you all those years waiting for something to happen.’

‘I know, I know, you’ve said it a thousand times, I thought some things did happen, once in a while, but look, I don’t want to argue. I’m not complaining about the *facts*, it’s just, just —’

‘Just you want to die,’ he finished for her.

She nodded, with a sob. ‘Then I think how insulting that is to everybody. To the children.’

Studying her, admiring her compact, symmetrical pose, he wanted to die with her; he felt she was crouching at the foot of a wall that was utterly blank, and the wall was within him. He wished to be out of this, this life and health he had achieved since leaving her, this vain and petty effort to be happy. His happiness and health seemed negligible, compared to the consecrated unhappiness they had shared. Yet there was no way out, no way but a numb marching forward, like a soldier in a discredited cause, with tired mottoes to move him. ‘You were depressed when you were living with me,’ he told Joan. That was one of the mottoes.

‘I know, I know, I’m not *blam*ing you, I’m not telling you to *do* anything, just —’

‘Just what?’ He shifted weight. His legs were aching; he glanced at his wristwatch. He had a date to keep.

‘Under*stand*.’

‘If I understood any more,’ he confessed, ‘I’d be totally paralyzed.’ He asked her, ‘How can I help you, short of coming back?’

‘That *would*n’t help, I’m not asking that.’

He didn’t believe this; but the possibility that it was true lifted his heart, a little greedy lift, like a fish engulfing a falling flake in an aquarium. The flake tasted bitter. ‘What are you asking, sweetie?’ He regretted calling her ‘sweetie.’ He had tried to amalgamate and align all his betrayals but they still multiplied and branched.

‘That you know what it feels like.’

He said, ‘If I’d been better at knowing what you feel like, we might not have come to this. But we *have* come to it. Now let go. You’re just tormenting everyone this way, yourself foremost. You’re healthy, you have the children, money, the house, friends; you have everything you had except me. Instead of me you have a freedom and dignity you didn’t have before. Tell me what I’m doing wrong,’ he begged.

She had to laugh at that, a little cluck; it occurred to him that her pose was a hatching one, her immobility a nesting hen’s.

He was getting later. Joan knew it. He had to get out, to move on. ‘You have a lot of life ahead of you,’ he tried. ‘It’s a *sin*, to talk about death the way you do. Why must this go on and on? I hate it. I feel glued fast. I come out here to see the children, not to have you make me feel guilty.’

She looked up at last. ‘You feel about as guilty as a —’ They waited together for what the simile would be. ‘Bedpost,’ she finished, taking the nearest thing to her, and they both had to laugh.