# Grandparenting

# John Updike

THE FORMER MAPLES had been divorced some years before their oldest child, Judith, married and had a baby. She was living with her husband, a free-lance computer programmer and part-time troubadour, on the edge of poverty in Hartford. Joan Maple, now Joan Vanderhaven, told Richard Maple over the phone that she and Andy, her husband, were intending to go down from Boston for the birth, which was to be induced. ‘How ridiculous,’ said Ruth, Richard’s wife. ‘The girl’s over thirty, she has a husband. To have her divorced parents both hovering over her isn’t just silly, it’s cruel. When I had my first baby I was in Hawaii and my mother was in Florida and that’s the way we both wanted it. You need *space* when you’re having a baby. You need *air*, to *breathe.’* Remembering her own, efficiently natural child-births, she began to pant, demonstratively. ‘Let your poor daughter alone. It’s taken her ten years to get over the terrible upbringing you two gave her.’

‘Joan says Judith wants her there. If she wants Joan she must want me. If I let Joan go down there alone with Andy the baby will think Andy’s the grandfather. The kid will get — what’s the word? — imprinted.’

Ruth said, ‘Nobody, not even an hour-old infant, could ever think Andy Vanderhaven is one of your family. You’re all ragamuffins, and Andy’s a fop.’ Richard had long ago grown used to Ruth’s crisp way of seeing things; it was like living in a pop-up book, with no dimension of ambiguity.

But the thought of letting his first grandchild enter the world without him near at hand was painful. Judith had been born in England, and had been tightly swaddled when he first saw her — a compact package with a round red face. She was the first baby he had ever held; he had thought it would be a precarious experience, shot through with fear of dropping something so precious and fragile, but no, in even the smallest infant there was an adhesive force, a something that actively fit your arms and hands, banishing the fear. The hot wobbly head, the wandering eyes like opaque drops of celestial liquid, the squinting little face choleric and muscular with the will to live. *We’re in this together, Dad*, the baby’s body had assured him, *and we’ll both get through it*.

And they had, through diapers and midnight feedings, colic and measles, adolescent tears and fits of silliness, flute lessons and ski lessons, grade school and high school, until at last, ceremoniously attending an entertainment by the graduating seniors, Richard had been startled by how his daughter, one of a leggy troupe of leotarded dancers, had in synchrony with the others struck a conclusive pose and stared unsmiling out at the audience. All their eyebrows were raised inquisitively. They were asking, *What are we?* And the answer, from the silently stunned audience, had become: *Women*. Richard had never before quite so distinctly seen his daughter as a body out in the world, competing, detached from his own. And now her body was splitting, giving birth to another, and he’d be damned if he’d let Joan be there having their grandbaby all to herself.

Driving down Route 86 into the blinding splinters of a sunset, he heard the disc jockey crow, ‘Get your long johns out of the mothballs, Nutmeg Staters, we’re going to flirt with zero tonight!’ It had been a dry January so far, but what little snow had fallen had not melted, because of the cold; tonight was to be a record-setter. The station played country music. Hartford had always struck him as a pleasantly hick city, a small forest of green-glass skyscrapers on the winding road to New York; when you descended out of the spaghetti of overpasses, there was a touching emptiness, of deserted after-hours streets and of a state capital’s grandiose vacancies. It was a city with nobody in it, just a few flitting shadows, and some heaps of plowed snow. The hospital complex included a parking garage, but he circled the inner-city blocks until he found a free meter. Not yet six o’clock, it was quite dark. Richard hurried through the iron air to the bright lights of the warm hospital spaces. He was the last of this particular extended family to arrive, and the least. A receptionist and her computer directed him to the correct floor, and after he had sat in the waiting room long enough to skim the cream from two issues of *Sports Illustrated*, Joan hurried out to him from some deeper, more intimate chamber of the maternity wing like a harried hostess determined to make every guest, however inconsequential, feel welcome.

She had put on weight with her contentment as Mrs Vanderhaven — Andy evidently didn’t impose the slimming stress of her first marriage — and wore a beltless yellow dress, with small flowers, that seemed old-fashioned, a back-to-nature dress from the Sixties. Her face, broader than he remembered it, was rosy with the event overtaking her — she was becoming a grandmother — and the tropical warmth of the hospital air. ‘We didn’t know if you’d be coming or not,’ she explained.

‘I said I would,’ Richard protested, mildly.

‘We didn’t know if Ruth would let you.’

‘How would she stop me? She thought it was a terrific idea. “Give them all my love,” she said.’

Joan shot him a quick, blue-eyed glance, uncertain, as she often had been, of how ironical he was being. She seemed in the years since they were married to have lost her eyelashes, and her hair had turned gray above her wide brow. Factually she said, ‘They broke the waters an hour ago, and now we’re just sitting around waiting for the contractions to take hold. Judy is in good spirits, though a little apprehensive.’ This last description seemed to fit Joan as well; she was shy with him. Their telephone conversations, which on the excuse of the children had persisted long into their second marriages, had dwindled these last years; months of silence between them went by now, and he did not know when he had last been as alone with her as he was in this hotly lit waiting room, with its rows of plastic chairs in alternating colors and its yammering television set up near the ceiling. It was the Sunday of the Super Bowl, and the announcers were revving up; even the female members of the news teams were supposed to be excited. Joan had been bending over awkwardly, to look him in the face, with her hands braced on her thighs, and now, perhaps in response to a pang in her back, she suddenly sat down, in the plastic chair next to his. His chair was dirty cream in color, hers scuffed orange. The molded shapes were for narrow people, and Richard and Joan had to edge away to avoid touching rumps.

‘Who wouldn’t be apprehensive?’ he asked. ‘And who is “we”?’ He had taken off his overcoat but was still wearing a tweed sports jacket, and uncomfortably felt the heat of her proximate body.

But Joan seemed to be rapidly relaxing. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘Paul, and Paul’s sister — she’s a nurse, as you know, but not at this hospital, but they let her come sit with us, in the pre-delivery room — and Andy and me. And of course Judy and the little stranger.’

‘Some crowd,’ he said. ‘How’s Paul acting?’

His son-in-law, whose blond hair was already thinning in front, wore a pony tail, and had always seemed to Richard insolently tall, as if he had just drawn himself up a few extra inches in a kind of full-body sneer. Richard had never quite known what the word ‘weedy’ meant, applied to a person, but Paul Wysocki had helped him to understand. A weedy person was a tall dry stalk you wanted to pull up and throw away. Richard was surprised the marriage had lasted five years. ‘*Won*derfully,’ Joan said, with defensive emphasis. ‘*Very* tender with Judy, and very confident. He didn’t miss a single birthing class, you know, and is all set to breathe with her. He brought her favorite book of poems, E. E. Cummings, to read to her as a distraction if she needs it.’

‘How do you read E. E. Cummings aloud? All those staggered letters and open spaces.’

‘We heard him himself do it, don’t you remember? The year he gave the Norton Lectures.’

Cummings had been a small, quite bald man in a tuxedo, very precise in manner, reading everything — Wordsworth, Dante, his own prose and poetry — in a fluting voice that never faltered or slipped, up there on the cavernous stage of Sanders Theatre. Richard and Joan had stood together in line in the Cambridge winter to get into the theatre, whose vast neo-Gothic space was murmurous and steaming with student excitement. For an instant he and this plump elderly woman beside him had become a pair of worn binoculars focused on that animated bright-headed homunculus lodged deep in the transparent mass of lost time. He was jointly and privately theirs, fluting Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode, stanza after stanza, while the student audience around them grew restless, wadded in place with hundreds of overcoats.

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Joan went away, promising shed be back. She did not invite him to join the crowd around Judith, nor did he want to. He took the elevator down to the cafeteria, to have a cup of coffee and a lemon Danish. Something about hospital cafeterias freed him from all dietary restraints. If it was bad for you, they wouldn’t be selling it. He called Ruth, collect. ‘Well, I’m here, honey. Nothing much is happening yet.’

He liked calling his wife, because her voice over the phone had a throaty, shapely quality he didn’t easily hear when they were face to face; it was a young voice, the voice of their old courtship — secretive, urgent, humid. Yet what she said was typically crisp: ‘Well, of course not. Whoever said anything *would* happen? You could be stuck there for days. Where are you staying?’

Richard smiled; she always asked that, as if his staying in any hotel or motel without her were a kind of infidelity. ‘At a Best Inn just off 84. I thought I should grab a room before I came here. It’s going to be record cold tonight. Is it zero yet in Boston?’

‘How would I know? I was watching *Sixty Minutes —* a *fas*cinating exposé of the pharmaceutical companies, and now I’ve missed the conclusion, thanks to you. Mike Wallace was being absolutely relentless with some wishy-washy Squibb CEO.’

‘I don’t think, once they induce, it takes days.’

‘Well, I never thought I’d wind up a grass widow while my husband runs around watching his children have children. How is Joan? As darling as ever?’

‘I only saw her a minute. They’re all in some other room timing Judy’s contractions, and I’m outside in the waiting room reading old *Smithsonian*s.’

‘How *unfair,’* Ruth said, and it sounded as though she was, at last, touched.

‘No, Joan understands. I don’t need to be in the same room with that willowy Pole.’

‘But you love Judith so.’

‘All the more reason, not to get her distracted.’

After hanging up, he went back into the cafeteria and bought an Almond Joy. He hadn’t had one for years. He had returned for less than a minute to his perusal of outdated magazines when Joan came back. ‘Where *were* you? Judy’s pace has picked up and she’s gone into the labor room.’ His former wife’s cheeks bore a hectic, spotty flush; with her wiggly gray hair and waistless figure she was looking like one of those art-loving Cambridge ladies Cummings had written about sardonically but who had shown up at his reading anyway, decades ago, among the hot-bodied undergraduates. ‘The doctor says Paul and I can stay with her, but not Andy. Andy hates waiting rooms, he thinks they’re full of germs, and the nurses said why not wait in Judy’s room? It has a television set. We thought maybe you’d like to go in there, too.’ Joan looked slightly alarmed at the idea, as if her two husbands hadn’t known each other for years, through thick and thin. ‘Judy’s worried about you sitting out here alone.’

‘Well, we don’t want to worry Judy, do we? Sure, why not?’ Richard said, and let her lead him down the corridor. Her hair looked less gray from behind, and bounced as it used to when she would wheel her bicycle ahead of him along the diagonal walks of Harvard Yard.

Andy was sitting in the room’s one leather chair, reading a prim little book from the Oxford University Press, with a sewn-in bookmark. He was wearing gold half-glasses and looked up like a skeptical schoolmaster. Richard told him, ‘Keep reading, Andy. I’ll just cower over here in the corner.’ Joan hovered uneasily, her hands held out from her body as if she were in a chain dance with invisible partners.

‘Dick,’ she said, pointing, ‘there’s a chair that looks at least half comfortable.’

Andy looked up over his glasses again. ‘Would you like the chair I’m sitting in, Richard? It’s all one to me.’

‘Absolutely not, Andy. Survival of the fittest. To the victor belong the spoils, or something. What’s that cute little book you’re reading? *The Book of Common Prayer*?’

It amused him that Joan, a clergyman’s daughter to whom the concept of God seemed not only dim but oppressive, had married such a keen churchman. Andy was an Episcopalian the way a Chinese mandarin was a Confucian, to keep his ancestors happy. He showed Richard the little anthology’s jacket: *West African Explorers*. ‘But astonishing,’ he said, ‘the faith some of these poor devils had. They were all walking straight into malaria, of course.’

‘You two will be all right, then?’ Joan asked.

Her husband didn’t respond, so Richard took it upon himself to reassure her. ‘Happy as clams. Let us know when the baby comes or dinner is served, whichever comes first.’

After listening to Andy turn pages and sniff for a while, and staring out the window at a paved, snow-dusted space crossed now and then by a human shadow hunched against the cold, he asked the other man, ‘Mind if I turn on the TV? We’re missing some great commercials.’

‘That football game? You watch such things?’

‘The Super Bowl, I generally do. Andy, how can you call yourself an American and not watch the Super Bowl?’

‘I don’t call myself an American,’ Andy said, and sniffed, ‘very often.’

Richard laughed. This was fun, he had decided. If he were at home, Ruth would have him watching *Nature* on PBS.

One team wore white helmets, and the other helmets were bronze in color. One quarterback threw passes like darts, neat and diagrammatic, and the other kept scrambling out of his crumbling pocket of protection to toss high wobbling balls, butterflies up for grabs. ‘What a catch!’ Richard cried out. ‘Did you see that, Andy? One-handed, six inches off the Astroturf !’

‘No, I didn’t see it.’

‘It was a miracle,’ Richard assured him. ‘A once-in-a-lifetime miracle. There — you can see it on replay!’

Joan kept checking on them every half-hour or so. On one trip, she brought them doughnuts, and on another, Styrofoam bowls of chicken-noodle soup on a tray of nubbly recycled cardboard. ‘The cafeteria is closing,’ she explained.

‘Crackers, did you remember crackers for me?’ Richard asked.

‘Salt and starch, Dicky boy,’ Andy said. ‘You still eat that crap?’

Joan blushed. ‘As a matter of fact, I did,’ she said to her former husband, and produced two packets of saltines from a pocket of her shapeless dress with its little yellow flowers. ‘I wasn’t going to give them to you unless you asked.’

Andy explained to him, ‘Already, there’s enough sodium in this canned soup to add five points to your blood pressure.’

‘Go! *Go!*’ Richard yelled at the screen, where a running back, his bronze helmet lowered, his brown calves pumping, was driving three tacklers backward to gain the yard needed for a first down.

Andy eventually stopped trying to read his book, and put on his distance glasses, the better to follow his ad-hoc roommate’s football commentary. Richard found himself wildly partisan for the bronze helmets — the more Eastern of the two teams, and the one with the scrambling quarterback and some butter-fingered ends. They were down by ten points at the half. The half-time show seemed very long and overpopulated and was based on nostalgia for a brand of Seventies rock that both men had been too old to appreciate the first time around. Richard went out and found a vending machine and brought back four dollars’ worth of candy bars and snacks in little waxed-paper bags. Andy ate a few cheese curls, wiping his fingers on his handkerchief afterwards. Joan came in, her eyes the electric blue they used to be after a bath, and told them, ‘They’re coming faster now.’ The contractions.

‘How many points is that?’ Andy asked when the bronze-helmeted quarterback was sacked behind his own goal line.

‘Just two. Last chance at the cheese curls.’

‘No thanks. All yours.’

‘How about a strawberry-flavored Twizzler?’

‘God, no.’

Richard wondered if Andy was this fastidious in bed. Perhaps that was what Joan had needed — a man to draw her out, to make her feel relatively liberated. ‘No matter where I go,’ she had once complained to Richard, not only of their sex, ‘you’re there ahead of me.’

‘Wow,’ Andy said, of a long, fluttering pass that found the receiver’s fingertips, and stayed in his grip despite a lethal blind-side hit.

‘That seems to be the name of the game now,’ Richard explained. ‘Trying to strip the ball. It’s amazing, what passes for legal with the pros. Watch what happens *after* the tackle.’ For how long, he wondered, had Joan and Andy been sleeping together before he had known? Saying she needed interests outside the home, she had joined the Episcopal choir, and would come back from Thursday-night rehearsals later and later, creeping between the sheets with a stealthy rustle as loud as a thunderclap. Even if he was asleep, her sudden warm body, with its cold toes and beery breath, would waken him. Andy sang bass, though you would have taken him for a tenor.

‘Survival of the fittest,’ Andy said now, smiling to himself.

A quick slant, another fluttering pass completed, a brilliant cut-back through a hole opened for a nanosecond by an all-pro offensive tackle, and then that big fullback tucking his head down and writhing over the goal line: the Eastern underdogs were back in the game. An interception early in the fourth quarter, by a lineman who almost lumbered off in the wrong direction, and the score was tied. Andy, who was well into it by now, cheered, and Richard offered him a palm-up hand for a slapped five. ‘My goodness,’ Joan said, once more entering the room. ‘Sorry to interrupt the fun, guys, but I have news.’

‘No!’ Richard said, suddenly terrified, as when sometimes in the movie theater a vast pit of reality and eventual death opened underneath him, showing the flickering adventure on the screen to be a mere idle distraction from his life, a waste of minutes while his final minute was rapidly approaching.

‘Yes,’ Joan said, complacently.

‘What sex?’

‘Paul wants to give you the particulars himself.’

‘What a tease she is, huh, Andy? Tell me at least the weight.’

‘Big. The whole process was big — amazing, seeing it from that side. The afterbirth!’ Her eyes rolled up, picturing it; then she gave her nervous clergyman’s — daughter laugh, to recall herself from so intimate a sharing, and said sharply to her present husband, ‘Andy, you must be starving.’

Paul came in a minute later, looking so tall he seemed stretched by a transcendent pull from the ceiling. His pale face and lank woman’s — length hair were damp with the exertions of vicarious labor. He stabbed at Richard’s chest with a recklessly extended hand, and, when Richard took it, said in his soulful troubadour manner, ‘Your dear, brave daughter has given birth to Richard Leo Wysocki.’

It was one of those prepared sentences, like Armstrong’s when setting foot on the moon, that came out stilted and hard to understand. They had named his grandson after him. Paul and Judith must have planned this ahead of time, in the event that it was a boy. ‘My God. You didn’t have to do that,’ Richard said, he feared ungraciously.

Visiting hours were long over. Out of sight, medical procedures had closed protectively around the mother and baby. Paul would stay, to see his wife settled into her room, but he gave the grandparent-figures permission to go. ‘The Super Bowl is still tied,’ Richard protested.

Andy said curtly, ‘It’ll be in all the papers tomorrow. Joan and I are leaving.’

Richard had to admire how carefully Andy wrapped his gray wool scarf around his neck, holding it in place with his chin while he inch by inch shrugged his overcoat up to his shoulders. Joan reached out as if to help her husband, and then, sensing Richard’s watching, suppressed the wifely gesture. ‘Don’t forget your book,’ she told Andy instead. ‘And your *Wall Street Journal*.’

Paul said, ‘Mr Maple, we’ll be moving Jude’ — he called Judith ‘Jude,’ as in ‘Hey Jude,’ rather than *Jude the Obscure* — ‘in here, but if you wanted to finish watching the Super Bowl I bet it’s on in the lobby downstairs. I don’t think they want you to stay on this floor.’ Already, he seemed more mature, and slightly stooped.

‘That’s fine, Paul — the party’s over. I’ll go with the other old folks. Tell Judith I’ll try to swing by tomorrow morning before I head back to Boston. Think that would be O.K.?’

‘Visiting hours don’t begin until one, but I would think, sure,’ Paul answered — rather grudgingly, Richard felt. He tailed the Vanderhavens out through the hospital corridors. Joan had acquired a mink coat since her marriage to him; its glinting collar set off becomingly her lightly bouncing hair, with its elusive texture between frizzy and wavy. Her hair was tightly curly elsewhere, and in the Sixties she had managed a pretty good Afro, for a white woman. On the other side of the glass hospital doors, the dark civic vacancy of Hartford brimmed with sheer cold. No one else moved on the streets; Richard’s eyes and nostrils stung, and within a minute the tips of his thumbs were aching in their thin leather gloves. Across the street, the hospital parking garage glowed with an aquarium dimness, and the booth where the man took the tickets was empty. To the striped cross-bar was attached a sign that in large red letters stated that the garage closed at nine-thirty.

‘Oh, *damn!*’ Andy cried, and stamped his foot on the snow-muffled asphalt. Both Richard and Joan laughed aloud, the gesture was so petulant and ineffective. Their laughter rang in the brittle cold as if off the rafters of a deserted church. Andy asked, ‘Why didn’t anybody *tell* us?’

‘I bet they thought you could read,’ Richard said. ‘It’s probably printed right on the ticket.’

Joan said, ‘I’m sorry, darling. It’s my fault. I was just so excited about becoming a grandmother I wasn’t noticing anything.’

‘And I don’t see any taxis anywhere,’ Andy said. ‘Damn, *damn!*’ He wore an astrakhan hat that made him look like a toy soldier, and every sentence from his mouth was a streaming white flag.

‘Where are you?’ Richard asked Joan.

‘I think it’s called the Morgan. It’s the only decent hotel downtown.’

That sounded more like Andy than the egalitarian Joan he had known. He said, ‘Don’t despair. I’ll take you in my car, and you can take a taxi back here in the morning.’

‘That’d be lovely,’ she said, swinging her body to keep warm, so that her coat shimmered in the faint street light. ‘Where are *you*?’

‘Good question. I parked on the street, but *I* was so excited I didn’t really think where. I remember I had to walk slightly uphill.’ He headed down the nearest slant of sidewalk, beside Joan in her mink, while Andy tailed behind them. The street came quickly to a dead end, next to what seemed tobe a boiler plant, a windowless brick building housing a muffled roaring of heat, and again Richard had to laugh. Joan did, too.

Andy whined, ‘Let me go back to the hospital and have them phone for a cab.’

‘Don’t be such a sissy. Think of yourself as a West African explorer,’ Richard said. His face was blazing in the cold and his thumbs in his thin gloves were quite numb. ‘It has to be around here somewhere. A gray Taurus, with three bridge stickers on the windshield. I remember noticing a row of boarded-up shops and wondering if kids looking for drugs were going to smash my windows.’

‘Great,’ Andy said. ‘Come on, Joan, let’s head back. This is a mugger’s paradise.’

‘Nonsense,’ Joan pronounced. ‘Everybody’s too cold to mug.’ She was still a liberal at heart. She turned and said, ‘Richard, *think*. What kind of shops? Did you cross any big streets? From what angle did you approach the hospital?’

Her hopeful voice, which he had first heard in a seminar on English-language epics — a dozen callow male faces around an oaken conference table, and hers, shining — summoned up in him a younger, student self. Ruth was so much more decisive and clear-headed than he that he rarely had to think. A grid began to build in his mind. ‘One street over,’ he said, pointing, ‘and then, I think, left.’ Joan led the way, he and Andy numbly following; she was the friskiest of the three, perhaps because she had the warmest coat. They had not walked ten minutes before he recognized his car — its three stickers, its pattern of road-salt stains. It had not been broken into. The shops he vaguely remembered were on the *other* side of the street, oddly. He was pleased to hear the door lock click; he had known it to freeze in weather warmer than this.

Joan got into the back, letting Andy have the seat by the heater. The engine started, and as the car rolled along the silent, glazed streets, she put her face up between the two men’s shoulders, talking to Richard. ‘The baby. When they come out — I’ve never seen this described — they have an expression on their faces, a funny little bunchy look of distaste. He looked just like Judith when we’d try to give her prunes. Then there’s a gush of water, and the rest of the baby slips out like nothing, trailing this enormous spiralled umbilical cord, all purply and yellow.’

‘Joanie, please,’ Andy said, readjusting his muffler.

She went on, inspired, to Richard, ‘I mean, the *apparatus*. You think of the womb as a kind of place for transients, but it’s a whole other life in there. It’s a lot to give up.’ He understood what she meant; as always, she was groping for the big picture, searching for the hidden secret, in keeping with all those sermons she had had to sit through as a child. Life is a lesson, a text with a moral.

Whereas Andy listened to her as one does to second wives, in confidence that the search is over. Or that there is no search. He patted her hand, where it rested in its mink sleeve next to his shoulders. ‘I shouldn’t have let you watch,’ he said. ‘It’s going to give you bad dreams.’

‘I wouldn’t have missed it for the world,’ she said, a bit indignantly, Richard felt.

‘Tell me one more thing,’ he begged. ‘Who the hell is Leo?’

‘*His* father — didn’t you know? They’re not like we were — this may be their only child, or male child at least, and they had to load him up.’

Andy told Richard, ‘Go right up there, and then you have to go left — it’s a one-way street. You can let us off at the corner and we’ll walk up to the entrance.’

‘I wouldn’t *dream* of it. I’ll circle the block and let you off right under the marquee. Right under the damn doorman’s nose.’

Joan’s hand touched his shoulder. ‘When you see Judith tomorrow morning, give my love. We ‘re going to hurry right back in the morning, Andy has a meeting at ten.’

Richard thought of kissing her good night, but their faces were probably still icy, and his neck didn’t turn as easily as it used to.

His room at the Best Inn was on the ground floor, its wall-to-wall shag carpeting laid over concrete poured right on grade. The walls seemed subterranean, breathing out a deep freeze, their surface cold to the touch. The baseboard heating was ticking but unequal to its task. Richard hadn’t thought to throw pajamas in with tomorrow’s fresh shirt; he shivered in his underwear between the clammy sheets, got up, robbed the other twin bed of its skimpy blanket and bedspread, and finally draped his overcoat on top of himself. Still, the cold pressed in upon him from the walls like a force that wanted to compress his existence to nothing, that wanted to erase this temporary blot of heated, pumping blood. *It’s a lot to give up*, Joan had said of the womb, and indeed the cosmic volume of lightless, warmthless space hostile to us is overwhelming. He felt, huddled up, like a homunculus frigidly burning at the far end of God’s indifferently held telescope. He was a newly hatched grandfather, and the universe wanted to crush him, to make room for newcomers. He did fall asleep, a little, and his dreams, usually so rich in suppressed longing and forgotten knowledge, were wispy, as if starved by his body’s effort to maintain body temperature.

In the morning, checking out, groggy and still chilled, at the front desk, he complained of the lack of heat; the youthful clerk, fresh arrived from a cozy bed elsewhere, shrugged in scant apology and said, ‘We don’t get a night like last night very often. Four below, on my mom’s porch.’

By daylight the hospital looked different: more bustling, yet more shabby and temporary, a factory of healing staffed by weary people working half in the dark. A Hartford *Courant* Richard bought with his tea — no more coffee, he vowed; keep that blood pressure down — said that his team of bronze-helmeted heroes had lost in the last thirty seconds, to a forty-seven-yard field goal. Miracles are cheap.

When, at last, against the strict rules, they let him in to see his daughter, Judith looked unexpectedly neutral after her ordeal — neither drained nor jubilant, sick nor well, older nor younger than her age of thirty-one. She was wearing a hospital johnny under Joan’s old powder-blue bathrobe, and sitting on the edge of the bed. She had been feeding the baby, and the nurses had taken him back to the nursery. ‘I don’t know, Dad,’ she said. ‘It was a little weird. They put this thing in my arms this morning and it’s like I had no idea what to do with it. I hardly even knew which end was up. I was afraid I’d drop it and felt very, you know, awkward.’

He sat down in the big leather chair Andy had taken last night and smiled paternally. ‘You’ll stop feeling awkward very quickly.’

‘Yeah, that’s what Paul says.’ Paul, the know-it-all. From just the way in which Judith pronounced his name, he had won an undeserved promotion. Richard found himself more jealous and resentful of Paul and the baby than of Andy. Judith said, ‘He’s a great father already.’

‘Maybe it’s an easier role. There isn’t all that — that apparatus. Maybe you’re still feeling the baby is part of yourself, like a foot. I mean, how much feeling can you work up right off the bat toward a foot? How did the actual — what’s the word — birthing go?’

Judith from infancy on had been a sturdy, independent sort, a little opaque in her feelings, with something of her mother’s detached honesty. ‘Good,’ she said. ‘It was good. Paul was great, with the breathing. At one point he began to sing, and got all the nurses laughing. But they were wrong about the Lamaze method. It hurt. They kept saying it was just pressure, but it *hurt*, Dad.’

Warmth swarmed to his eyes, at the thought of his daughter in pain. He blinked and stood and kissed her lightly on her forehead, that wide pale brow that from the start, love her as much as he could, held behind it her secrets, her sensations, her identity. ‘I should go. The nurses want to do something to you.’

‘Look at him around the corner. See who you think he looks like. Mom thinks he looks like Grandpa, the way his mouth has a little pinch in the middle, and turns down at the ends.’

‘Sounds like Andy’s mouth to me. You don’t suppose he’s the real grandfather, do you?’

It took Judith a moment to put it together and to realize that her father was being ironical. She was as groggy as he was; he had been compressed in the night, and she had been split in two. He told her, ‘Your mother by the way said to give her love. Andy was rushing her back to Boston bright and early, as soon as they could spring their car from the garage, where it got trapped last night.’

‘She told me all about it. She was in, she and Andy, right after breakfast. She talked him into it, I guess.’

Richard laughed. ‘It’s going to be hard to keep up with your mother, in the grandparenting business.’

‘Yeah. You should see *her* hold the baby. *She* knew which end was up.’

To him, too, it seemed clear, when a nurse brought his grandson to the window, that this reddish grapefruit, with its frowning closed eyes and its few licks of silky hair, pale like its father’s, was a human head, and that the tiny lavender appendages on the other, unswaddled end were toes. ‘Want to hold him?’ the nurse, who was young and black, asked him through the glass.

‘Do I dare?’

‘You’re the grandpap, aren’t you? Grandpaps are special people around here.’

And the child’s miniature body did adhere to his chest and arms, though more weakly than the infants he had presumed to call his own. Nobody belongs to us, except in memory.