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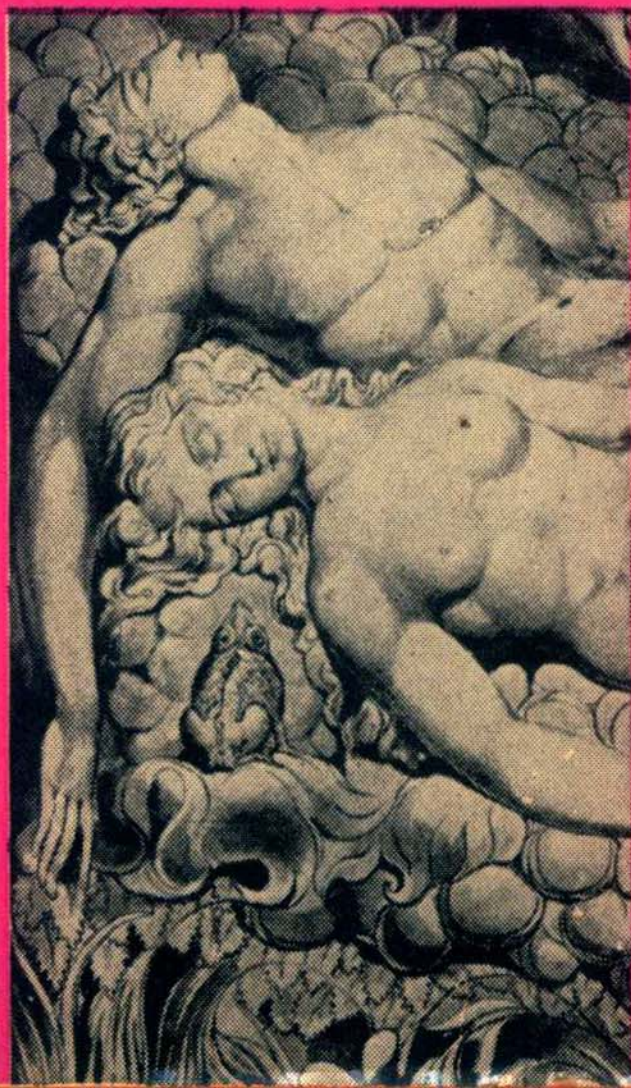
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Couples

*By JOHN
UPDIKE*



Couples

by

John Updike



A FAWCETT CREST BOOK

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TO MARY

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Couples

“TRAPPED IN THEIR COZY CATACOMBS, the couples have made sex by turns their toy, their glue, their trauma, their therapy, their hope, their frustration, their revenge, their narcotic, their main line of communication and their sole and pitiable shield against the awareness of death. Adultery, says Updike, has become a kind of ‘imaginative quest’ for a successful hedonism that would enable man to enjoy an otherwise meaningless life. . . . The couples of Tarbox live in a place and time that together seem to have been ordained for this quest.”

—*Time* magazine

By John Updike:

THE POORHOUSE FAIR, *a novel*

THE SAME DOOR, *short stories*

RABBIT, RUN, *a novel*

PIGEON FEATHERS *and other stories*

THE CENTAUR, *a novel*

VERSE, *poetry*

ASSORTED PROSE, *a miscellany*

OF THE FARM, *a novel*

THE MUSIC SCHOOL, *short stories*

There is a tendency in the average citizen, even if he has a high standing in his profession, to consider the decisions relating to the life of the society to which he belongs as a matter of fate on which he has no influence—like the Roman subjects all over the world in the period of the Roman empire, a mood favorable for the resurgence of religion but unfavorable for the preservation of a living democracy.

—PAUL TILLICH,
The Future of Religions

*We love the flesh: its taste, its tones,
Its charnel odor, breathed through Death's jaws. . . .
Are we to blame if your fragile bones
Should crack beneath our heavy, gentle paws?*

—ALEXANDER BLOK,
"The Scythians"

CHAPTER ONE



Welcome to Tarbox

“WHAT DID YOU MAKE OF THE NEW COUPLE?”

The Hanemas, Piet and Angela, were undressing. Their bedchamber was a low-ceilinged colonial room whose woodwork was painted the shade of off-white commercially called eggshell. A spring midnight pressed on the cold windows.

“Oh,” Angela answered vaguely, “they seemed young.” She was a fair soft brown-haired woman, thirty-four, going heavy in her haunches and waist yet with a girl’s fine hard ankles and a girl’s tentative questing way of moving, as if the pure air were loosely packed with obstructing cloths. Age had touched only the softened line of her jaw and her hands, their stringy backs and reddened fingertips.

“How young, exactly?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s thirty trying to be forty. She’s younger. Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine? Are you thinking of taking a census?”

He grudgingly laughed. Piet had red hair and a close-set

body; no taller than Angela, he was denser. His flattish Dutch features, inherited, were pricked from underneath by an acquired American something—a guilty humorous greed, a wordless question. His wife's languid unexpectedness, a diffident freshness born of aristocratic self-possession, still fascinated him. He thought of himself as coarse and saw her as fine, so fair and fine her every gesture seemed transparently informed by a graciousness and honesty beyond him. When he had met her, Angela Hamilton, she had been a young woman past first bloom, her radiance growing lazy, with an affecting slow mannerism of looking away, the side of her neck bared, an inexplicably unscarred beauty playing at schoolteaching and living with her parents in Nun's Bay, and he had been laboring for her father, in partnership with an army friend, one of their first jobs, constructing a pergola in view of the ocean and the great chocolate-dark rock that suggested, from a slightly other angle, a female profile and the folds of a wimple. There had been a cliff, an ample green lawn, and bushes trimmed to the flatness of tables. In the house there had been many clocks, grandfather's and ship's clocks, clocks finished in ormolu or black lacquer, fine-spun clocks in silver cases, with four balls as pendulum. Their courtship passed as something instantly forgotten, like an enchantment, or a mistake. Time came unstuck. All the clocks hurried their ticking, hurried them past doubts, around sharp corners and knobbed walnut newels. Her father, a wise-smiling man in a tailored gray suit, failed to disapprove. She had been one of those daughters so favored that spinsterhood alone might dare to claim her. Fertility at all costs. He threw business his son-in-law's way. The Hanemas' first child, a daughter, was born nine months after the wedding night. Nine years later Piet still felt, with Angela, a superior power seeking through her to employ him. He spoke as if in self-defense. "I was just wondering at what stage they are. He seemed rather brittle and detached."

"You're hoping they're at our stage?"

Her cool thin tone, assumed at the moment when he had believed their intimacy, in this well-lit safe room en-

circled by the April dark, to be gathering poignant force enough to vault them over their inhibitions, angered him. He felt like a fool. He said, "That's right. The seventh circle of bliss."

"Is that what we're in?" She sounded, remotely, ready to believe it.

They each stood before a closet door, on opposite sides of an unused fireplace framed in pine paneling and plaster painted azure. The house was a graceful eighteenth-century farmhouse of eight rooms. A barn and a good square yard and a high lilac hedge came with the property. The previous owners, who had had adolescent boys, had attached a basketball hoop to one side of the barn and laid down a small asphalt court. At another corner of the two acres stood an arc of woods tangent to a neighboring orchard. Beyond this was a dairy farm. Seven miles further along the road, an unseen presence, was the town of Nun's Bay; and twenty miles more, to the north, Boston. Piet was by profession a builder, in love with snug right-angled things, and he had grown to love this house, its rectangular low rooms, its baseboards and chair rails molded and beaded by hand, the slender mullions of the windows whose older panes were flecked with oblong bubbles and tinged with lavender, the swept worn brick of the fireplace hearths like entryways into a sooty upward core of time, the attic he had lined with silver insulation paper so it seemed now a vaulted jewel box or an Aladdin's cave, the solid freshly poured basement that had been a cellar floored with dirt when they had moved in five years ago. He loved how this house welcomed into itself in every season lemony flecked rhomboids of sun whose slow sliding revolved it with the day, like the cabin of a ship on a curving course. All houses, all things that enclosed, pleased Piet, but his modest Dutch sense of how much of the world he was permitted to mark off and hold was precisely satisfied by this flat lot two hundred feet back from the road, a mile from the center of town, four miles distant from the sea.

Angela, descended from piratical New Bedford whaling

captains, wanted a property with a view of the Atlantic. She had mourned when the new couple in town, the Whitmans, had bought, through the agency of Gallagher & Hamena, Real Estate and Contracting, a house she had coveted, the old Robinson place, a jerrybuilt summer house in need of total repair. It had a huge view of the salt marshes and a wind exposure that would defy all insulation. She and Piet had gone over it several times in the winter past. It had been built as a one-story cottage around 1900. In the early twenties it had been jacked up on posts and a new first floor built under it, with a long screened porch that darkened the living room. Then new owners had added a servants' wing whose level differed by two steps from the main structure. Piet showed Angela the shabby carpentry, the crumbling gypsum wallboard, the corroded iron plumbing, the antique wiring with its brittle rubber insulation, the rattling sashes chewed by animals and rain. A skylight in the main bedroom leaked. The only heat came from a single round register in the living room floor, above a manually fed coal furnace in an unwalled clay hole. A full cellar would have to be excavated. Solid interior walls and a complete heating system were essential. The roof must be replaced. Gutters, sashes. Ceilings. The kitchen was quaint, useless; servants had run it, summers only, making lobster salads. On the two windward sides the cedar shingles had been warped and whitened and blown away. Forty thousand the asking price, and twelve more immediately, minimum. It was too much to ask him to take on. Standing at the broad slate sink contemplating the winter view of ditch-traversed marsh and the brambled islands of hawthorn and alder and the steel-blue channel beyond and the rim of dunes white as salt and above all the honed edge of ocean, Angela at last agreed. It was too much.

Now, thinking of this house from whose purchase he had escaped and from whose sale he had realized a partner's share of profit, Piet conservatively rejoiced in the house he had held. He felt its lightly supporting symmetry all around him. He pictured his two round-faced daughters

asleep in its shelter. He gloated upon the sight of his wife's body, her fine ripeness.

Having unclasped her party pearls, Angela pulled her dress, the black décolleté knit, over her head. Its soft wool caught in her hairpins. As she struggled, lamplight struck zigzag fire from her slip and static electricity made its nylon adhere to her flank. The slip lifted, exposing stocking-tops and garters. Without her head she was all full form, sweet, solid.

Pricked by love, he accused her: "You're not happy with me."

She disentangled the bunched cloth and obliquely faced him. The lamplight, from a bureau lamp with a pleated linen shade, cut shadows into the line of her jaw. She was aging. A year ago, she would have denied the accusation. "How can I be," she asked, "when you flirt with every woman in sight?"

"In sight? Do I?"

"Of course you do. You know you do. Big or little, old or young, you eat them up. Even the yellow ones, Bernadette Ong. Even poor little soused Bea Guerin, who has enough troubles."

"You seemed happy enough, conferring all night with Freddy Thorne."

"Piet, we can't keep going to parties back to back. I come home feeling dirty. I hate it, this way we live."

"You'd rather we went belly to belly? Tell me"—he had stripped to his waist, and she shied from that shieldlike breadth of taut bare skin with its cruciform blazon of amber hair—"what do you and Freddy find to talk about for hours on end? You huddle in the corner like children playing jacks." He took a step forward, his eyes narrowed and pink, party-chafed. She resisted the urge to step backwards, knowing that this threatening mood of his was supposed to end in sex, was a plea.

Instead she reached under her slip to unfasten her garters. The gesture, so vulnerable, disarmed him; Piet halted before the fireplace, his bare feet chilled by the hearth's smooth bricks.

"He's a jerk," she said carelessly, of Freddy Thorne. Her voice was lowered by the pressure of her chin against her chest; the downward reaching of her arms gathered her breasts to a dark crease. "But he talks about things that interest women. Food. Psychology. Children's teeth."

"What does he say psychological?"

"He was talking tonight about what we all see in each other."

"Who?"

"You know. Us. The couples."

"What Freddy Thorne sees in me is a free drink. What he sees in you is a gorgeous fat ass."

She deflected the compliment. "He thinks we're a circle. A magic circle of heads to keep the night out. He told me he gets frightened if he doesn't see us over a weekend. He thinks we've made a church of each other."

"That's because he doesn't go to a real church."

"Well Piet, you're the only one who does. Not counting the Catholics." The Catholics they knew socially were the Gallaghers and Bernadette Ong. The Constantines had lapsed.

"It's the source," Piet said, "of my amazing virility. A stiffening sense of sin." And in his chalkstripe suit pants he abruptly dove forward, planted his weight on his splayed raw-knuckled hands, and stood upside down. His tensed toes reached for the tip of his conical shadow on the ceiling; the veins in his throat and forearms bulged. Angela looked away. She had seen this too often before. He neatly flipped back to his feet; his wife's silence embarrassed him. "Christ be praised," he said, and clapped, applauding himself.

"Shh. You'll wake the children."

"Why the hell shouldn't I, they're always waking me, the little bloodsuckers." He went down on his knees and toddled to the edge of the bed. "Dadda, Dadda, wake up-up, Dadda. The Sunnay paper's here, guess what? Jackie Kenneny's having a *baby!*"

"You're so cruel," Angela said, continuing her careful undressing, parting vague obstacles with her hands. She opened her closet door so that from her husband's angle

her body was hidden. Her voice floated free: "Another thing Freddy thinks, he thinks the children are suffering because of it."

"Because of what?"

"Our social life."

"Well I have to have a social life if you won't give me a sex life."

"If you think *that* approach is the way to a lady's heart, you have a lot to learn." He hated her tone; it reminded him of the years before him, when she had instructed children.

He asked her, "Why shouldn't children suffer? They're supposed to suffer. How else can they learn to be good?" For he felt that if only in the matter of suffering he knew more than she, and that without him she would raise their daughters as she had been raised, to live in a world that didn't exist.

She was determined to answer him seriously, until her patience dulled his pricking mood. "That's positive suffering," she said. "What we give them is neglect so subtle they don't even notice it. We aren't abusive, we're just evasive. For instance, Frankie Appleby is a bright child, but he's just going to waste, he's just Jonathan little-Smith's punching bag because their parents are always together."

"Hell. Half the reason we all live in this silly hick town is for the sake of the children."

"But we're the ones who have the fun. The children just get yanked along. They didn't enjoy all those skiing trips last winter, standing in the T-bar line shivering and miserable. The girls wanted all winter to go some Sunday to a museum, a nice warm museum with stuffed birds in it, but we wouldn't take them because we would have had to go as a family and our friends might do something exciting or ghastly without us. Irene Saltz finally took them, bless her, or they'd never have gone. I like Irene; she's the only one of us who has somehow kept her freedom. Her freedom from crap."

"How much did you drink tonight?"

"It's just that Freddy didn't let me talk enough."

"He's a jerk," Piet said and, suffocated by an obscure