

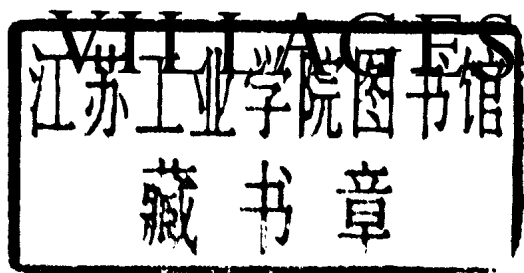
JOHN UPDIKE

VILLAGES

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2

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David Updike walked me through MIT, and Charles Gardiner and Ken Schneider kindly scanned the computer parts of this novel. But errors and missteps are all my own. — J. U.

Portions of the first four chapters were previously published in *The New Yorker* magazine under the titles "Sin: Early Impressions," "Elsie by Starlight," and Village Sex—II."

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VILLAGES

John Updike was born in 1932 in Shillington, Pennsylvania. He attended Shillington High School, Harvard College and the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford, where he spent a year on a Knox Fellowship. From 1955 to 1957 he was a member of the staff of the *New Yorker*, to which he has contributed numerous poems, short stories, essays and book reviews. Since 1957 he has lived in Massachusetts as a freelance writer.

John Updike's first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, was published in 1959. It was followed by *Rabbit, Run*, the first volume of a series that has since become known as the *Rabbit* books, which John Banville described as 'one of the finest literary achievements to have come out of the US since the war'. *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Other novels by John Updike include *Marry Me*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, which was made into a major feature film, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, *Toward the End of Time*, *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Seek My Face*. He has written a number of volumes of short stories, including the highly acclaimed *The Afterlife and Other Stories* and *Licks of Love*, which includes 'Rabbit Remembered'. The recently published collection *The Early Stories* gathers together almost all his short fiction from the years 1953 to 1975. His essays and criticism which first appeared in magazines such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books* have been collected into six volumes, the most recent of which is *More Matter: Essays and Criticism* (1999). *Collected Poems 1953-1993* brings together almost all of his verse, whilst his most recent book of poems is entitled *Americana*. Most of his titles are published by Penguin.

Also by John Updike

POEMS

The Carpentered Hen (1958) • *Telephone Poles* (1963) • *Midpoint* (1969) • *Tossing and Turning* (1977) • *Facing Nature* (1985) • *Collected Poems 1953–1993* (1993) • *Americana* (2001)

NOVELS

The Poorhouse Fair (1959) • *Rabbit, Run* (1960) • *The Centaur* (1963) • *Of the Farm* (1965) • *Couples* (1968) • *Rabbit Redux* (1971) • *A Month of Sundays* (1975) • *Marry Me* (1976) • *The Coup* (1978) • *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) • *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) • *Roger's Version* (1986) • *S.* (1988) • *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) • *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992) • *Brazil* (1994) • *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) • *Toward the End of Time* (1997) • *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) • *Seek My Face* (2002)

SHORT STORIES

The Same Door (1959) • *Pigeon Feathers* (1962) • *Olinger Stories* (a selection, 1964) • *The Music School* (1966) • *Bech: A Book* (1970) • *Museums and Women* (1972) • *Problems and Other Stories* (1979) • *Too Far to Go* (a selection, 1979) • *Bech Is Back* (1982) • *Trust Me* (1987) • *The Afterlife* (1994) • *Bech at Bay* (1998) • *Licks of Love* (2000) • *The Complete Henry Bech* (2001) • *The Early Stories: 1953–1975* (2003)

ESSAYS AND CRITICISM

Assorted Prose (1965) • *Picked-Up Pieces* (1975) • *Hugging the Shore* (1983) • *Just Looking* (1989) • *Odd Jobs* (1991) • *Golf Dreams: Writings on Golf* (1996) • *More Matter* (1999)

PLAY

Buchanan Dying (1974)

MEMOIRS

Self-Consciousness (1989)

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The Magic Flute (1962) • *The Ring* (1964) • *A Child's Calendar* (1965) • *Bottom's Dream* (1969) • *A Helpful Alphabet of Friendly Objects* (1996)

*Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain. . . .*

—MATTHEW ARNOLD, "Dover Beach"

Chapters

i.	<i>Dream On, Dear Owen</i>	3
ii.	<i>Village Sex—I</i>	18
iii.	<i>The Husband</i>	34
iv.	<i>Village Sex—II</i>	57
v.	<i>How Phyllis Was Won</i>	81
vi.	<i>Village Sex—III</i>	101
vii.	<i>On the Way to Middle Falls</i>	115
viii.	<i>Village Sex—IV</i>	134
ix.	<i>Convalescence</i>	159
x.	<i>Village Sex—V</i>	188
xi.	<i>Developments in Hardware</i>	213
xii.	<i>Village Sex—VI</i>	236
xiii.	<i>You Don't Want to Know</i>	269
xiv.	<i>Village Wisdom</i>	301

VILLAGES

i. *Dream On, Dear Owen*

FOR A LONG TIME, his wife has awoken early, at five or five-thirty. By the rhythms of her chemistry, sometimes discordant with Owen's, Julia wakes full of affection for him, her companion on the bed's motionless voyage through that night of imperfect sleep. She hugs him and, above his protests that he is still sleeping, declares in a soft but relentless voice how much she loves him, how pleased she is by their marriage. "I'm just so happy with you."

This after twenty-five years of life together. He is seventy, she sixty-five; her announcement, newsworthy to her, slightly insults him: how could it be otherwise? After all their trials, and the pain they gave others. They waded through; here they are, on the other side. She tugs at him; she twists his head in order to kiss his mouth. But his lips are puffy and numb with sleep, and in his anesthetized state, his nerves misaligned, it feels like an attempt to suffocate him; it rubs him, as people used to say, the wrong way. After a few minutes more of lovestricken fidgeting, while he stubbornly fails to respond, protecting the possibility of return-

ing to his precious dreams, Julia relents and rises from the bed, and Owen, gratefully stretching himself into her vacated side, falls asleep for another hour or two.

One morning in this last, stolen hour he dreams that, in a house he does not know (it has a shabby, public air to it, as of a boarding-house or a hospital), faceless official presences guide him into a room where, on a bed like theirs, two single beds yoked together to make a king-size, a man—rather young, to judge from the smoothness of his blond body, with its plump buttocks—lies upon his wife's body as if attempting resuscitation or (not at all the same thing) concealment. When, under silent direction from the accompanying, officiating presences, this stranger removes himself, Owen's wife's body, also naked, is revealed, supine: the white relaxed belly, the breasts flattened by gravity, her dear known sex in its gauzy beard of fur. She is dead, a suicide. She has found the way out of her pain. Owen thinks, *If I had not interfered with her life, she would be still alive.* He yearns to embrace her and breathe her back to life and suck back into himself the poison that his existence has worked upon hers.

Then, slowly, reluctantly, as one lifts one's attention from a still-unsolved puzzle, he wakes up, and of course she is not dead; she is downstairs generating the smell of coffee and the rumble of an early news show: several bantering voices, male and female. Traffic and weather, Julia loves them both, they never cease to interest her, these chronic daily contingencies, though she quit commuting to Boston three years ago. He can hear the blue rubber flip-flops she insists on wearing, as if forever young and dressed for a beach, slap back and forth in the kitchen, refrigerator to countertop to breakfast table, and then to sink and trashmasher and dishwasher and on into the dining room, watering her plants.

She loves her plants with the same emotional organ, perhaps, with which she loves the weather. The noise the flip-flops make, and the hazard they represent to her footing—she keeps slipping on the stairs—irritate him, but he does like the sight of her bare toes, spread slightly apart, as on hard-working Asian feet, their little joints whitened by the tension of keeping her flip-flops on. She is a small, dense-bodied brunette; unlike his first wife, she takes a good smooth tan.

Some days, half-roused, he finds the way back to sleep only by remembering one of the women, Alissa or Vanessa or Karen or Faye, who shared with him the town of Middle Falls, Connecticut, in the 'sixties and 'seventies. His hand gripping his drowsy prick, he relives having one of them beneath him, beside him, above him, brushing back her hair as she bends her face to his swollen core, its every nerve crying out for moist, knowing contact; but today is not one of those days. The strengthening white sun of spring glares brutally beneath the window shade. The real world, a tiger unwounded by his dream, awaits. It is time to get up and shoulder a day much like yesterday, a day that his animal optimism assumes to be the first of a sequence stretching endlessly into the future but that his cerebrum—hypertrophied in the species *Homo sapiens*—knows to be one more of a diminishing finite supply.

The village, so-called, of Haskells Crossing awakens around their private hill; the steady dull whir of traffic presses through the pine and plaster house walls and the insulating woods beyond. The newspapers—the *Boston Globe* for him, the *New York Times* for her—have already been delivered. Birds long have been astir, the robins picking after worms, the crows boring into the lawn for chinch-bug grubs, the swallows snatching mosquitoes from midair,

kind calling to kind in their jubilant pea-brained codes. He shouts down the stairs on his way to the bathroom, "Good morning, Julia!"

Her cry returns: "Owen! You're up!"

"Sweetie, of course I'm up; my goodness, it's after seven o'clock."

The older they get, the more they talk like children. Her voice comes up the stairs, lightly arguing, semi-teasing: "You always sleep to eight, now that you have no train to catch."

"Darling, what a liar you are! I *never* sleep past seven; I wish I could," he goes on, though uncertain if she has moved away from the stairs and can't hear him, "but that's one of the things of old age, you're up with the birds. Wait until it hits *you*."

This is connubial nonsense: talk about pea-brained codes. If the day were a computer, he thinks, this is how it boots up, reloading main memory. Julia in fact sleeps less than he (as did his first wife, Phyllis), but her being five years younger has always been for him a source of pride and sexual stimulus, like the sight of her toes at the front of her blue flip-flops. He also likes to see, below her bathrobe, her pink heels as they retreat, the vertical strokes of her Achilles tendons alternating, one quick firm step after the other, her feet splayed outward in the female way.

They hold this conversation while he waits, his bladder aching, outside the door to his bathroom, beside the stairs that descend to the kitchen. The image of his beloved Julia lying naked and dead in his dream, and the dream sensation of guilt that made her suicide in reality a murder committed by him, are still more vivid than the daily waking facts—the wallpaper with its sepia roses and muted metallic gloss, the

new hall carpet with its fresh beige nap and thick, springy undercarpet, the day ahead with its hours to climb like rungs on an ancient, dangerous, splintering ladder.

While Owen shaves at the mirror mounted by the window, where his pouchy and sun-damaged old face, cruelly magnified, frontally accepts the pitiless light, he hears the mockingbird, mounted on its favorite perch at the tip of the tallest cedar, deliver a thrilling long scolding about something or other, some minor, chronic procedural matter. All these local levels of Nature—the birds, the insects, the flowers, the furtive fauna of chipmunks and woodchucks scuttling in and out of their holes as if a shotgun might blast them the next instant—have their own network of concerns and communications; the human world to them is merely a marginal flurry, an inscrutable static, an intermittent interference rarely lethal and bearing no perceived relation to the organic bounty (the garbage, the gardens) that the human species brings to Nature's table. *They snub us*, Owen thinks. We should be gods to them, but they lack our capacity for worship—for foresight and the terrors and convoluted mental grovelling that foresight brings with it, including the invention of an afterlife. Animals do not distinguish between us and the other beasts, or between us and the rocks and trees, each with its pungence and relevance to the struggle for existence. The earth offers haven to scorpions and woodchucks and quintillions of ants; the stars guide the Canada geese and arctic terns, the barn swallows and monarch butterflies in their immense annual migrations. We are mere dots beneath their wings, our cities foul and barren interruptions in the discourse of predator and prey. No, not interruptions, for many species accept our cities as habitats, not just the rats in the cellar and the bats in the

attic but the hawks and pigeons on the skyscraper ledges and now the deer brazenly, helplessly stalking through suburban back yards, both pets and pests.

Owen stiffens his lower lip to take the razor's ticklish sideways scrape. He tries to shave without seeing his face, which has never been exactly the face he wanted—too much nose, not enough chin. An inviting weakness, and yet a sharp-eyed wariness. Lately, creases drag at the corners of his mouth, and the eyelids are wrinkled like a desert reptile's, so that their folds snag and weigh on his lashes in the morning. He hates that familiar feeling of something in his eye, elusive but bothersome. Pollen. An eyelash. A burst capillary. Behind him, through the insulating woods, the sounds of engines, of backfiring, and of backing trucks' warning beep, make felt the skimpy commercial section, a block or two long, of Haskells Crossing; it is audible but not visible from his house in its leafy hilltop concealment. Though he can see the lights of the town clearly from his upstairs windows, he has never found a spot in town from which his house is visible. That pleases him; it is like his consciousness, invisible but central.

As a child he assumed that somehow the world was set in motion by his awaking. What happened before he awoke was like the time before he was born, a void he could not contemplate. It always surprises him how early, in villages as well as cities, morning activity begins, not just among fabled worm-catching birds but among men—the commuter hastening to catch the 6:11 train, the owner of the fruit store in town already back with his truck from the open market near the Callahan Tunnel, the jogging young mothers having done their miles before standing with their children at the bus stop, the village idlers already stationed on their bench by the war memorial, there next to the

old brick fire station, across the main street from the bakery. The baker, an ill-shaved French Canadian with a chest sunken from too many cigarettes, has been up since four, tinging the cold air with the fragrance of baking croissants, cinnamon rolls, and blueberry muffins.

Owen can see it all in his mind's eye as he scrapes at the last of the shaving soap, thrusting his insufficient chin forward to smooth the slack creases underneath. The fire station, if you want to know, is an ornate nineteenth-century structure almost too narrow for the modern fire truck recently purchased by the aldermen in Cabot City, of which Haskells Crossing is an outlying ward; after each call, usually a false alarm, the truck backs into its berth, excitedly beeping, with only a few inches to spare on either side. The war memorial is an expandable list of names, movable white letters on a black, slotted surface behind glass, the dead from Haskells Crossing listed back to the French and Indian War. The largest group fell in the Civil War, the next largest in World War II. Below the Korean conflict (two names) and the Vietnam intervention (four) and the 1991 Iraqi action (a single name, an enlisted man accidentally crushed while helping unload a sixty-seven-ton M1A1 Abrams heavy-armor battle tank from the belly of a C-5 Galaxy cargo plane at Saudi Arabia's Jabayl Airfield), a considerable space has been left for future casualties, in future conflicts. Sensible New England thrift: Owen likes it. He has found his final village here.

The first was in Pennsylvania: the borough of Willow, population four thousand, a "string town" grown, as the nineteenth century became the twentieth, from a wayside inn along the road, surrounded by fields growing corn and tobacco. The road, following a southeasterly river for forty-five miles, eventually reached Philadelphia but was here

called Mifflin Avenue, after the quarrelsome first governor of the Keystone State. Three miles in another direction lay a medium-sized city, Alton—Alton, with its factories of blackened brick set right in amid the row houses, its railroad tracks cutting the downtown in two, its red-light district called Pussy Alley, its corner bars faced in Permastone, its movie palaces of pseudo-Islamic grandeur, and its noisy, porky restaurants. “Rip-off joints,” his father called the restaurants. His father hated eating out; he hated being waited on, especially by men, who he felt were more expensive and bullying than waitresses; he hated rich restaurant food, which he sometimes vomited later, as a sign of contempt; he hated dessert, the sales tax, and the tip. Owen’s mother, overweight in all but her son’s earliest memories of her, loved eating well, and would sit there cowed and fuming while her husband methodically ruined her pleasure. Or so it seemed to their only child, who read the marital drama from a limited point of view: though his hair was the dull, safe brown of his father’s—hair so fine it lifted from their heads when they removed their hats or sat near an electric fan—his sympathies lay with his auburn-haired mother. Yet his father’s fear of running out of money sank into his stomach, and gnawed there. Perhaps by no accident did his life’s migration take him northeast, to a region of rocky, shallow soil and reluctant expenditure.

In Pennsylvania, the sandstone inns—seeds of villages some of which thrived and expanded while others became a decaying huddle—were spaced every three miles or so, the distance a man could walk in an hour or a team of horses could pull a farm wagon on a summer day without needing to be watered. Farm life still controlled time. Old people dozed in the middle of the day. Neighbors on the street peddled asparagus, beans, and tomatoes grown in their back