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"AN ASTONISHING NOVEL."

The Houston Post

"Sentence by sentence, it glimmers."

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"Mr. Updike has created a memorable picture of an individual in crisis and unforgettable images of a society in transition. He has honed and polished his dazzling style to jewel-like precision. . . . More importantly, Mr. Updike has put his heart into this final movement of his extended quartet, endowing it with an emotional depth and strength rare today. In short, *Rabbit at Rest* is a signal achievement in John Updike's brilliant career."

The Dallas Morning News

"There is doubtless no other work in all of American fiction that examines the soul of a man so thoroughly and with such sustained power as the four novels that now make up John Updike's *Rabbit* opus. Gloriously rich in language and observed detail, deeply touching in sadness and tickling in humor."

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Rabbit basks above that old remembered world, rich,
at rest.

—*Rabbit Is Rich*

Food to the indolent is poison, not sustenance.

—*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*

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I. FL

STANDING amid the tan, excited post-Christmas crowd at the Southwest Florida Regional Airport, Rabbit Angstrom has a funny sudden feeling that what he has come to meet, what's floating in unseen about to land, is not his son Nelson and daughter-in-law Pru and their two children but something more ominous and intimately his: his own death, shaped vaguely like an airplane. The sensation chills him, above and beyond the terminal air-conditioning. But, then, facing Nelson has made him feel uneasy for thirty years.

The airport is relatively new. You drive to it off Exit 21 of Interstate 75 down three miles of divided highway that for all the skinny palms in rows and groomed too-green Bermuda grass at its sides seems to lead nowhere. There are no billboards or self-advertising roadside enterprises or those low houses with cooling white-tile roofs that are built by the acre down here. You think you've made a mistake. An anxious red Camaro convertible is pushing in the rearview mirror.

"Harry, there's no need to speed. We're early if anything."

Janice, Rabbit's wife, said this to him on the way in. What rankled was the tolerant, careful tone she has lately adopted, as if he's prematurely senile. He looked over and watched her tuck back a stubborn fluttering wisp of half-gray hair from her sun-toughened little brown nut of a face. "Honey, I'm being tail-gated," he explained, and eased back into the right lane and let the speedometer needle quiver back below sixty-five. The Camaro convertible passed in a rush, a cocoa-brown black chick in a gray felt stewardess's cap at the wheel, her chin and lips pushing forward, not giving him so much as a sideways glance. This rankled, too. From the back, the way they've designed the trunk and bumper, a Camaro seems to have a mouth, two fat

metal lips parted as if to hiss. So maybe Harry's being spooked began then.

The terminal when it shows up at last is a long low white building like a bigger version of the sunstruck clinics—dental, chiropractic, arthritic, cardiac, legal, legal-medical—that line the boulevards of this state dedicated to the old. You park at a lot only a few steps away from the door of sliding brown glass: the whole state babies you. Inside, upstairs, where the planes are met, the spaces are long and low and lined in tasteful felt gray like that cocky stewardess's cap and filled with the kind of music you become aware of only when the elevator stops or when the dentist stops drilling. Plucked strings, no vocals, music that's used to being ignored, a kind of carpet in the air, to cover up a silence that might remind you of death. These long low tasteful spaces, as little cluttered by advertisements as the highway, remind Rabbit of something. Air-conditioning ducts, he thinks at first, and then crypts. These are futuristic spaces like those square tunnels in movies that a trick of the camera accelerates into spacewarp to show we're going from one star to the next. *2001*, will he be alive? He touches Janice at his side, the sweated white cotton of her tennis dress at the waist, to relieve his sudden sense of doom. Her waist is thicker, has less of a dip, as she grows into that barrel body of women in late middle age, their legs getting skinny, their arms getting loose like cooked chicken coming off the bone. She wears over the sweaty tennis dress an open-weave yellow cardigan hung unbuttoned over her shoulders against the chill of airport air-conditioning. He is innocently proud that she looks, in her dress and tan, even to the rings of pallor that sunglasses have left around her eyes, like these other American grandmothers who can afford to be here in this land of constant sunshine and eternal youth.

"Gate A5," Janice says, as if his touch had been a technical question. "From Cleveland by way of Newark," she says, with that businesswoman efficiency she has taken on in middle age, especially since her mother died seven years ago, leaving her the lot, Springer Motors and its assets, one of only two Toyota agencies in the Brewer, Pennsylvania, area: the family all still speak of it as "the lot," since it began as a used-car lot owned and run by Fred Springer, dead Fred Springer, who is reincarnated, his widow Bessie and daughter Janice have the fantasy, in Nelson, both being wiry shrimps with something shifty about them. Which is why Harry and Janice spend half the year in

Florida—so Nelson can have free run of the lot. Harry, Chief Sales Representative for over ten years, with him and Charlie Stavros managing it all between them, wasn't even mentioned in Ma Springer's will, for all the years he lived with her in her gloomy big house on Joseph Street and listened to her guff about what a saint Fred was and her complaining about her swollen ankles. Everything went to Janice, as if he was an unmentionable incident in the Springer dynasty. The house on Joseph Street, that Nelson and his family get to live in just for covering the upkeep and taxes, must be worth three hundred thousand now that the yuppies are moving across the mountain from northeast Brewer into the town of Mt. Judge, not to mention the cottage in the Poconos where even the shacks in the woods have skyrocketed, and the lot land alone, four acres along Route 111 south of the river, might bring close to a million from one of the hi-tech companies that have come into the Brewer area this last decade, to take advantage of the empty factories, the skilled but depressed laboring force, and the old-fashionedly cheap living. Janice is rich. Rabbit would like to share with her the sudden chill he had felt, the shadow of some celestial airplane, but a shell she has grown repels him. The dress at her waist felt thick and unresponsive, a damp hide. He is alone with his premonition.

A crowd of welcomers has collected this Tuesday after Christmas in the last year of Reagan's reign. A little man with that hunched back and awkward swiftness Jews often seem to have dodges around them and shouts behind him to his wife, as if the Angstroms weren't there, "Come on, Grace!"

Grace, Harry thinks. A strange name for a Jewish woman. Or maybe not. Biblical names, Rachel, Esther, but not always: Barbra, Bette. He is still getting used to the Jews down here, learning from them, trying to assimilate the philosophy that gives them such a grip on the world. That humpbacked old guy in his pink checked shirt and lipstick-red slacks racing as if the plane coming in was the last train out of Warsaw. When Harry and Janice were planning the move down here their advisers on Florida, mostly Charlie Stavros and Webb Murkett, told them the Gulf side was the Christian coast as opposed to the Jewish Atlantic side but Harry hasn't noticed that really; as far as his acquaintanceship goes all Florida is as Jewish as New York and Hollywood and Tel Aviv. In their condo building in fact he and Janice are pets of a sort, being gentiles: they're considered cute. Watching that little guy, seventy if he's a day, breaking into a

run, hopping zigzag through the padded pedestal chairs so he won't be beaten out at the arrival gate, Harry remorsefully feels the bulk, two hundred thirty pounds the kindest scales say, that has enwrapped him at the age of fifty-five like a set of blankets the decades have brought one by one. His doctor down here keeps telling him to cut out the beer and munchies and each night after brushing his teeth he vows to but in the sunshine of the next day he's hungry again, for anything salty and easy to chew. What did his old basketball coach, Marty Tothero, tell him toward the end of his life, about how when you get old you eat and eat and it's never the right food? Sometimes Rabbit's spirit feels as if it might faint from lugging all this body around. Little squeezey pains tease his ribs, reaching into his upper left arm. He has spells of feeling short of breath and mysteriously full in the chest, full of some pressing essence. When he was a kid and had growing pains he would be worried and the grown-ups around him laughed them off on his behalf; now he is unmistakably a grownup and must do his own laughing off.

A colorful octagonal nook of a shop selling newspapers and magazines and candy and coral souvenirs and ridiculous pastel T-shirts saying what bliss southwestern Florida is interrupts the severe gray spaces of the airport. Janice halts and says, "Could you wait here a sec till I see if they have the new *Elle*? And maybe I should go back and use the Ladies while I have the chance, the traffic going home might be terrible what with the weather continuing so beachy."

"Now you think of it," he says. "Well, *do* it if you're going to do it." The little Mamie Eisenhower bangs she still wears have grown skimpy with the years and curly with the humidity and saltwater and make her look childish and stubborn and cute, actually.

"We still have ten minutes at least, I don't know what that jerk was in such a hurry about."

"He was just in love with life," Harry tells her, and obediently waits. While she's in the Ladies he cannot resist going into the shop and buying something to nibble, a Planter's peanut-brittle bar for forty-five cents. Planter's Original Peanut Bar, the wrapper says. It was broken in two somewhere in transit and he thinks of saving one half to offer his two grandchildren when they're all together in the car heading home. It would make a small hit. But the first half is so good he eats the second and even dumps the sweet crumbs out of the wrapper into his palm and with his tongue licks them all up like an anteater. Then he

thinks of going back and buying another for his grandchildren and him to share in the car—"Look what Grandpa has!" as they turn onto Interstate 75—but doesn't trust himself not to eat it all and makes himself stand and look out the window instead. This airport has been designed with big windows viewing the runways, so if there's a crash everybody can feast upon it with their own eyes. The fireball, the fuselage doing a slow skidding twirl, shedding its wings. As he tries with his tongue to clean the sticky brittle stuff, the caramelized sugar and corn syrup, from between his teeth—all his still, thank God, and the front ones not even crowned—Rabbit stares out at the big square of sunny afternoon. The runway tapering to a triangle, the Florida flatness turning brown as thatch beyond the green reach of a watering system. Winter, the shadow of it that falls down here, hasn't hit yet. Every day the temperature has been in the eighties. After four winters in Florida he knows how the wind off the Gulf can cut into you on the first tee if you have an early starting time and the sweaters can be shed only as the sun climbs toward noon, but this December except for that one cold snap in the middle of the month has been like early September in Pennsylvania—hot, and only the horse chestnuts turning and only a certain weary dryness in the air and the buzz of cicadas to suggest that summer is over.

As the candy settles in his stomach a sense of doom regrows its claws around his heart: little prongs like those that hold fast a diamond solitaire. There has been a lot of death in the newspapers lately. Max Robinson the nation's first and only black national anchorman and Roy Orbison who always wore black and black sunglasses and sang "Pretty Woman" in that voice that could go high as a woman's and then before Christmas that Pan Am Flight 103 ripping open like a rotten melon five miles above Scotland and dropping all these bodies and flaming wreckage all over the golf course and the streets of this little town like Glockamorra, what was its real name, Lockerbie. Imagine sitting there in your seat being lulled by the hum of the big Rolls-Royce engines and the stewardesses bringing the clinking drinks caddy and the feeling of having caught the plane and nothing to do now but relax and then with a roar and giant ripping noise and scattered screams this whole cozy world dropping away and nothing under you but black space and your chest squeezed by the terrible unbreathable cold, that cold you can scarcely believe is there but that you sometimes actually feel still packed into the suitcases, stored in the unpressurized hold,

when you unpack your clothes, the dirty underwear and beach towels with the merciless chill of death from outer space still in them. Just yesterday some jet flying from Rochester to Atlanta tore open at thirty-one thousand feet, a fourteen-inch hole the newspaper said, and was lucky to land in West Virginia. Everything falling apart, airplanes, bridges, eight years under Reagan of nobody minding the store, making money out of nothing, running up debt, trusting in God.

Harry has flown in his life to dealers' conferences here and there and that time nine years ago with two other couples to the Caribbean, but to Florida he and Janice always drive, so they have the car there. Nelson will probably bitch because there's only one, though it's a Camry station wagon that takes six comfortably, Nelson likes to do his own thing, going off on mysterious errands that take hours. Nelson. A real sore spot. Harry's tongue begins to sting, so he stops working at a jagged bit of corn-syrup sweetness stuck behind an eye tooth.

And also in the *Fort Myers News-Press* this morning an item about a pregnant woman over in Fort Lauderdale shot in an attempted robbery yesterday. Must have been black but the paper didn't say so, they don't now. She died but they saved the baby by Caesarean section. And then there was also on the front page this interview with a guy convicted of picking up a twelve-year-old girl and getting her to smoke dope and raping her and then burning her alive somehow and now complaining about the cockroaches and rats in the cell on death row and telling the reporter, "I've always tried to do the best I can, but I'm no angel. And I'm no killer either." His saying this made Harry laugh, it rang a kind of bell with him. No angel yet no killer either. Not like this guy Bundy who murdered dozens of women in dozens of states and has been stalling his execution for ten years in Tallahassee down here. And Hirohito too is taking his time. Harry can remember when Hirohito was right up there with Hitler and Mussolini in the war propaganda.

And he has never forgot how, thirty years ago it will be this June, his baby daughter Rebecca June drowned and when he went back to the apartment alone there was still this tubful of tepid gray water that had killed her. God hadn't pulled the plug. It would have been so easy for Him, Who set the stars in place. To have it unhappen. Or to delete from the universe whatever it was that exploded that Pan Am 747 over Scotland. Those bodies with hearts pumping tumbling down in the dark. How much did they know as they fell, through air dense like tepid water, tepid

gray like this terminal where people blow through like dust in an air duct, to the airline we're all just numbers on the computer, one more or less, who cares? A blip on the screen, then no blip on the screen. Those bodies tumbling down like wet melon seeds.

A star has appeared in the daytime sky, in the blue beneath the streaks of stratocirrus, an airplane glinting, lowering, heading straight toward them. This glint, he thinks, holds his near and dear: Nelson his son, his left-handed daughter-in-law called Pru though she was christened Teresa, Judy his eight-year-old granddaughter, and Roy his four-year-old grandson, born the same fall Harry and Janice began to spend half the year in Florida. The baby actually was named after both fathers, Harold Roy, but everybody calls him Roy, something Harry could resent since Roy Lubell is a sorehead laid-off Akron steamfitter who didn't even come to the wedding and never did shit for his seven hungry kids. Pru still seems hungry and in that she reminds Harry of himself. The star grows, has become a saucer shape glinting in a number of points, a winged aluminum machine aglide and enlarging above the sulky flat scrubland and horizon thready with palms. He imagines the plane exploding as it touches down, ignited by one of its glints, in a ball of red flame shadowed in black like you see on TV all the time, and he is shocked to find within himself, imagining this, not much emotion, just a cold thrill at being a witness, a kind of bleak wonder at the fury of chemicals, and relief that he hadn't been on the plane himself but was instead safe on this side of the glass, with his faint pronged sense of doom.

Janice is at his side again. She is breathless, excited. "Harry, hurry," she says. "They're *here*, ten minutes early, there must have been a tail wind from Newark. I came out of the Ladies and went down to the gate and couldn't find you, you weren't *there*. Where *were* you?"

"Nowhere. Just standing here by the window." That plane he had mentally exploded hadn't been their plane at all.

Heart thumping, his breath annoyingly short, he strides after his little wife down the wide gray carpeting. Her pleated tennis skirt flicks at the brown backs of her thighs and her multilayered white Nikes look absurdly big at the end of her skinny legs, like Minnie Mouse in her roomy shoes, but Janice's getup is no more absurd than many in this crowd of greeters: men with bankers' trim white haircuts and bankers' long grave withholding faces wearing Day-Glo yellow-green tank tops stencilled CORAL POINT

OF CAPTIVA ISLAND and tomato-red bicycle shorts and Bermudas patterned with like fried eggs and their permed and thick-middled women in these ridiculous one-piece exercise outfits like long flannel underwear in pink or blue, baby colors on Kewpie-doll shapes, their costumes advertising the eternal youth they have found like those skiers and tennis players and golfers now who appear on television laden with logos like walking billboards. The hunchbacked little Jewish guy in such a hurry has already met his loved one, a tall grinning woman, a Rachel or Esther with frizzed-out hair and a big pale profile, carrying over one arm her parka from Newark, her plump dumpy mother on the other side of her, Grace was her name, while the old man with angry choppy gestures is giving the women the latest version of his spiel, they listening with half an ear each to this newest little thing he feels very strongly about. Rabbit is curious to see that this grown daughter, a head taller than her parents, appears to have no mate. A tall black man, slick-looking in a three-piece gray suit, but nothing of a dude, carrying himself with a businesslike Wasp indifference to his appearance and lugging one of those floppy big bags that smart travellers use and that hog all the overhead rack space, is trailing unnaturally close behind. But he can't be a relation, he must be just trying to pass, like that black chick in the red Camaro coming in off 75. Everybody tailgating, that's the way we move along now.

Harry and Janice reach Gate A5. People get off of airplanes in clots, one self-important fusspot with three bags or some dodderly old dame with a cane bunching those behind them. You wonder if we haven't gone overboard in catering to cripples. "There they are," Janice pronounces at last, adding under her breath to Harry quickly, "Nelson looks exhausted."

Not so much exhausted, Rabbit thinks, as shifty. His son is carrying his own son on his left arm, and Nelson's right eye squints, the lid seeming to quiver, as if a blow might come from that unprotected side. Roy must have fallen asleep on the flight, for his head leans against his father's neck seeking a pillow there, his eyes open with that liquid childish darkness but his plump mouth mute, gleaming with saliva, in shock. Harry goes forward as soon as the ropes allow to lift the burden from his son, but Nelson seems reluctant to let go, as if the child's own grandfather is a kidnapper; Roy, too, clings. With a shrug of exasperation Harry gives up and leans in close and kisses Roy's velvety cheek, finer than velvet, still feverish with sleep, and shakes his own son's small and clammy hand. In recent years

Nelson has grown a mustache, a tufty brown smudge not much wider than his nose. His delicate lips underneath it never seem to smile. Harry looks in vain into this fearful brown-eyed face for a trace of his blue-eyed own. Nelson has inherited Janice's tense neatness of feature, with her blur of evasion or confusion in the eyes; the puzzled look sits better on a woman than a man. Worse, Janice's high forehead and skimpy fine hair have become in Nelson a distinctly growing baldness. His receding temples have between them a transparent triangle of remaining hair soon to become an island, a patch, and at the back of his head, when he turns to kiss his mother, a swath of skin is expanding. He has chosen to wear a worn blue denim jacket down on the plane, over a crisp dressy shirt, though, pink stripes with white collar and cuffs, so he seems half cocked, like a married rock star or a weekend gangster. One earlobe bears a tiny gold earring.

"Mmmm-wah!" Janice says to cap her hello kiss; she has learned to make such noises down here, among the overexpressive Jewish women.

Harry carefully greets Judith and Pru. Going to be nine in less than a month, the skinny girl is a sketch of a woman, less than life-size and not filled in. A redhead like her mother. Lovely complexion, cheeks rosy under the freckles, and the details of her face—lashes, eyebrows, ears, nostril-wings, lips quick to lift up on her teeth—frighteningly perfect, as if too easy to smash. When he bends to kiss her he sees in front of her ear the sheen of childhood's invisible down. She has Pru's clear green eyes and carrot-colored hair but nothing as yet in her frail straight frame and longish calm face of the twist that life at some point gave Pru, making her beauty even when she was twenty-four slightly awkward, limping as it were, a look that has become more wry and cumbersome with the nine years of marriage to Nelson. She likes Harry and he likes her though they have never found a way around all these others to express it. "What a pair of beauties," he says now, of the mother and daughter.

Little Judy wrinkles her nose and says, "Grandpa's been eating candy again, for shame on him. I could smell it, something with peanuts in it, I can tell. He even has some little pieces stuck between his teeth. For shame."

He had to laugh at this attack, at the accuracy of it, and the Pennsylvania-Dutch way the little girl said, "for shame." Local accents are dying out, but slowly, children so precisely imitate their elders. Judy must have overheard in her house Nelson and Pru and maybe Janice talking about his weight problem and

rotten diet. If they were talking, his health problems might be worse than he knows. He must look bad.

"Shit," he says, in some embarrassment. "I can't get away with anything any more. Pru, how's the world treating you?"

His daughter-in-law surprises him by, as he bends dutifully forward to kiss her cheek, kissing him flush on the mouth. Her lips have a wry regretful shy downward twist but are warm, warm and soft and big as cushions in the kiss's aftermath within him. Since he first met her in the shadows of Ma Springer's house that long-ago summer—a slender slouching shape suddenly thrust into the midst of their lives, Nelson's pregnant Roman Catholic girlfriend from Ohio, a Kent State University secretary named Teresa Lubell, to become the mother of his two grandchildren, the carrier of his genes toward eternity—Pru has broadened without growing heavy in that suety Pennsylvania way. As if invisible pry bars have slightly spread her bones and new calcium been wedged in and the flesh gently stretched to fit, she now presents more front. Her face, once narrow like Judy's, at moments looks like a flattened mask. Always tall, she has in the years of becoming a hardened wife and matron allowed her long straight hair to be cut and teased out into bushy wings a little like the hairdo of the Sphinx. Her hips and shoulders too have widened, beneath the busy pattern—brown and white and black squares and diamond-shapes arranged to look three-dimensional—of the checked suit she put on for the airplane, a lightweight suit wrinkled by the three hours of sitting and babysitting. A stuffed blue shoulder bag is slung across one shoulder and her arms and hands clutch a camel-colored topcoat, two children's jackets, several slippery children's books based on morning television shows, a Cabbage Patch doll with its bunchy beige face, and an inflated plastic dinosaur. She has big hands, with pink, cracked knuckles. Harry's mother had hands like that, from washing clothes and dishes. How did Pru get them, in this age of appliances? He stands gazing at her in a half-second's post-kiss daze. Having a wife and children soon palled for him, but he never fails to be excited by having, in the flesh, a daughter-in-law.

She says, slangily, to mask the initial awkwardness when they meet, "You're lookin' good, Harry. The sunny South agrees with you."

What did that frontal kiss mean? Its slight urgency. Some sad message there. She and Nelson never did quite fit.

"Nobody else thinks so," he says, and grabs at her shoulder

bag. "Lemme help you carry some of this stuff, I'll take the bag." He begins to pull it off.

Pru shifts the coat and toys to extend her arm to let him take it but at the same time asks him, "Should you?"

Harry asks, "Why does everybody treat me like some god-damn kind of invalid?" but he is asking the air; Pru and Janice are hugging with brisk false enthusiasm and Nelson is plodding ahead down the long gray corridor with Roy back to sleep on his shoulder. Harry is irritated to see that though Nelson has a careful haircut that looks only a few days old the barber left one of those tails, like a rat's tail, uncut and hanging down over the boy's collar, under the spreading bald spot. How old does he think he is, seventeen? Little Judy trails her father but Nelson is not waiting or looking back. The girl is just old enough to sense that in her nice proper airplane outfit she should not sacrifice all dignity and run to catch up. She wears a navy-blue winter coat over a pink summer dress; its pink hem shows below the coat, and then her bare legs, which look long, longer than when he saw her last in early November. But it is the back of her head that kills him, her shiny carrot-colored hair braided into a pigtail caught into a showy stiff white ribbon. Something of her mother's Catholic upbringing in that ribbon, decking out the Virgin or the baby Jesus or Whoever to go on parade, to go on a ride in the sky. The sleek back of Judy's head, the pigtail bouncing as she tries not to run, so docilely, so unthinkingly wears the showy ribbon her mother put there that Harry smiles. Hurrying his stride, he catches up and reaches down and says, "Hey there, good-lookin'," and takes the hand she with a child's reflex lifts to be taken. Her hand is as surprisingly moist as her mother's lips were warm. Her head with its bone-white parting is higher than his waist. She complains to her mother, Harry has heard from Janice, about being the tallest girl in her section of the fourth grade. The mean boys tease her.

"How's school going?" he asks.

"I hate it," Judy tells him. "There are all these kids think they're big shots. The girls are the absolute worst."

"Do you ever think *you're* a big shot?"

She ponders this. "Some boys are always getting after me but I tell them to fuck off."

He clucks his tongue. "That's pretty rough language for the fourth grade."

"Not really," she says. "Even the teacher says 'damn' sometimes when we get her going."