

Dearest Charles—

The distance between us grows, even as my pen hesitates. The engines drone in the spaces between words, eating up the miles, the acres of the flat farms in big brown and green squares below the wing as it inches along. I close my eyes and see our white house, its two screened porches and long glassy conservatory, its peek at the sea and the rocks of the cove—those gray rocks you and Pearl and I have picnicked on so many times and that when the sun beats on their veins feel warm even in February—and its undulating lap of lawn and the bulb bed so happy and thrusty with leaves, now that spring has come. Do leave a note for the lawn boys when they come tomorrow to set their big wide reel mower a notch higher, since last Tuesday they scalped that area over by the roses, where the ground bulges up. How often I've spoken to them about it, and with what results! Of course it's not always the same boys, year after year.

I bought two extra boxes each of your apple granola and unprocessed bran—so you have breakfasts at least for a month. You may wish to speak to Mrs. Kimball about coming now more than once a week. As you know Thursday is her day and I always try to tidy up for her, especially the kitchen and our bedroom. She arrives around noon. If you can't bring yourself to make the bed at least pull the covers up and smooth the puff. The most gracious thing, the day she comes, is to air the bed for the morning with the puff and covers *down* and windows *open* to get our body smells out but possibly such refinements were wasted on her anyway. Also: she knows where the front-door key is hidden down up in under the garbage-can bin lid, the door on the right, and puts it back there when she goes home, but *don't leave the burglar alarm on* when you go off in the morning—I did once, as you may remember, absent-mindedly when Irving switched yoga lessons at Midge's to Thursday morning because the boy who helps him in the framing shop had to go to his grandmother's funeral or something and the police came as they're supposed to (though not very promptly, she later confided) and poor Mrs. K. with that crooked heavy-lidded eye of hers that makes her look dishonest in any case had a terrible time explaining, since though I trust her with the key I could never bring myself to trust her with the code to the burglar-alarm system—it seemed too intimate. She does, incredible though it may seem to us, have a sex life and who knows with what kind of men who might casually get it out of her? Whereas it would take a real conscious betrayal for her to cold-bloodedly take a key to the hardware store and have duplicates made on that nasty-sounding little machine. You might ask her if she can give you Mondays as well. The thing about dust and dirt that men don't realize is it doesn't just sit there, *it sinks in*.

I withdrew half of our joint accounts, all the ones I could

find records of—the 5½% checking, the savings account at 6½%, and the capital account in Boston at 7¼% (I think). Indeed, I took a *teeny* bit more than half since the CDs are tied up for six months at a time and you have all the Keogh and medical-partnership retirement-plan money stashed away that you've always been rather cagey and secretive about, not to mention those tax-shelter real-estate partnerships Ducky Bradford got you into years ago and that you said would be too much trouble and might alert the IRS to put into our joint name—one of the things I suppose I've always resented without admitting it to myself is how you tended to call money "yours" that we really earned together since not only was I keeping up *our* lovely home to enhance your image with your patients and fellow-doctors and raising *our* daughter virtually unassisted since you were always at the office for reasons that didn't dawn on poor innocent me for years, not to mention how while you so heroically (everybody kept telling me) slogged through medical school and internship *I* was the one who gave up two years of college and any chance of going on to graduate school—I was majoring, you have no doubt forgotten, in French philosophy, Descartes to Sartre—it's amazing to me what I once knew and have forgotten, all that being and nothingness and *cogito ergo sum*, all I remember now is essence precedes existence, or is it the other way around?—

John Updike, *S. A Novel* (1988)

In the kitchen, he poured another drink and looked at the bedroom suite in his front yard. The mattress was stripped and the candy-striped sheets lay beside two pillows on the chiffonier. Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom—nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side.

His side, her side.

He considered this as he sipped the whiskey.

The chiffonier stood a few feet from the foot of the bed. He had emptied the drawers into cartons that morning, and the cartons were in the living room. A portable heater was next to the chiffonier. A rattan chair with a decorator pillow stood at the foot of the bed. The buffed aluminum kitchen set took up a part of the driveway. A yellow muslin cloth, much too large, a gift, covered the table and hung down over the sides. A potted fern was on the table, and a few feet away from this stood a sofa and chair and a floor lamp. The desk was pushed against the garage door. A few utensils were on the desk, along with a wall clock and two framed prints. There was also in the driveway a carton with cups, glasses, and plates, each object wrapped in newspaper. That morning he had cleared out the closets, and except for the three cartons in the living room, all the stuff was out of the home. He had run an extension cord on out there and everything was connected. Things worked, no different from how it was when they were inside.

Now and then a car slowed and people stared. But no one stopped. It occurred to him that he wouldn't, either.

"It must be a yard sale," the girl said to the boy.

This girl and this boy were furnishing a little apartment.

"Let's see what they want for the bed," the girl said.

"And for the TV," the boy said.

The boy pulled into the driveway and stopped in front of the kitchen table.

They got out of the car and began to examine things, the girl touching the muslin cloth, the boy plugging in the blender and turning the dial to MINCE, the girl picking up a chafing dish, the boy turning on the television set and making little adjustments.

He sat down on the sofa to watch. He lit a cigarette, looked around, flipped the match into the grass.

The girl sat on the bed. She pushed off her shoes and lay back. She thought she could see a star.

"Come here, Jack. Try this bed. Bring one of those pillows," she said.

"How is it?" he said.

"Try it," she said.

He looked around. The house was dark.

"I feel funny," he said. "Better see if anybody's home."

She bounced on the bed.

"Try it first," she said.

He lay down on the bed and put the pillow under his head.

"How does it feel?" she said.

"It feels firm," he said.

She turned on her side and put her hand to his face.

"Kiss me," she said.

"Let's get up," he said.

"Kiss me," she said.

She closed her eyes. She held him.

He said, "I'll see if anybody's home."

But he just sat up and stayed where he was, making believe he was watching the television.

Lights came on in the houses up and down the street.

"Wouldn't it be funny if," the girl said and grinned and didn't finish.

The boy laughed, but for no good reason. For no good reason, he switched the reading lamp on.