

My Daughter, John Updike, and Me

It was a Tuesday morning, and I was blow drying my hair in the bathroom as my six-year-old daughter called for at least the fifth time in ten minutes, “Mom!” She began to talk outside the door, but naturally I couldn’t hear her, so I turned off the dryer for the second time.

“You have to give me money for the book today.”

“What book, honey?” There had been so many books in my head those past few weeks since I’d been preparing to interview John Updike for a local magazine.

“The one the lady is coming to sign.”

This was enough explanation to remind me that a children’s author was signing books that day at the elementary school. I told Kyra that I’d write a check as soon as I was done my hair.

But when I came out of the bathroom, I found that despite several reminders, she still had not brushed her hair and put on her socks.

“Come on, sweetie,” I said. The words “come on” escaped my mouth as if from a reflex triggered deep in the brain, like breathing or my heart beat. “Get your socks and shoes.”

I tried to run a brush over her moving head while she attempted to pull her sock over the stubborn part of her heel. She yowled as I pulled her hair, and then, of course, the sock, having twisted on her foot, had to be done over again. I tried to put the arm that wasn’t adjusting her shoe buckle into her coat sleeve, but she immediately pulled it out to buckle the other shoe.

“Come on.” I herded her toward the apartment door. “Mommy can’t be late for class.”

“But the book money!” she protested.

“Oh, my god,” I sighed. Turning around, I charged back up the stairs and grabbed the form off the table. Holding the checkbook in my hand, I scribbled an illegible check before we headed for the door again.

Finally in the car, Kyra was quieted by the trance of motion, and John Updike appeared in the passenger seat beside me. For at least a week, I’d been conversing with him in my head. Translucent but distinct, he went everywhere with me. We talked about his stories as I listened to them on tape in

my car. Over lunch, while I read interviews with him, I barraged him with questions of my own. And yes, we even chatted in bed while I skimmed one book after another on his life and career.

Born in Shillington, Pennsylvania in 1932, Updike seemed sure of his success from the beginning. His promise as an artist was apparent already in kindergarten when he published a collage in the magazine *Children's Activities*. He went on to contribute 285 cartoons, articles, and poems to his high school newspaper, *The Chatterbox*. At Harvard, he crafted art and poems for the *Harvard Lampoon*, which he also eventually edited. Just four years after receiving his bachelor's degree, Updike published his first book of poetry, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures*, in 1958. Since then, barely a year went by without the release of a new Updike volume — novels, story collections, poetry, essays, and criticism. He had everything short of a Nobel Prize, and many pulled for him to get that too.

"You've written more books than many Americans own," I said to him with a sideways glance. "I'm thirty-four and I haven't written one."

He wore tailored wool pants and a gray, crew neck sweater. From a widely published 1960's photo, this is what I called his Beatles look. Sitting with his long legs extended beneath the dashboard, he told me that I could still apply to MFA programs when Kyra was grown. I told him that probably seemed easier to envision from his perspective than from mine.

All my life I've had two literary heroes — not entirely for their writing, oddly, but for where they were born — John O'Hara and John Updike, both Pennsylvania authors. O'Hara spent his early years in a house six blocks from my own childhood home in Pottsville, and Updike's boyhood residence is a short drive from the Reading suburb where I now reside. These two stars formed the guiding constellation of my teenage years. They were two bright spots in an upbringing otherwise devoid of culture, and I grew up believing that if I navigated carefully, maybe I could follow them to bigger places.

I began writing stories in the second grade. When I was the only student in my elementary school to qualify for the gifted program, the Intermediate Unit sent a teacher to work with me once a week. Sitting side-by-side with me on

blue plastic chairs in a little used school library, she noted with what relish I carefully penciled my fables of jungle animals and portraits of 18th century ladies ascending staircases drawn in perspective. Watching me, she apparently abandoned whatever lesson plans she may have had and instead let me write and draw with free reign. In a few years, I was winning trophies in county art contests and having a poem published in the local newspaper. In high school, I took my first creative writing class, where in an exercise on metaphors, I wrote, "Motherhood is immortality." I can't remember wanting to be anything in my life but a writer and a mom. But I had no idea how hard it would prove to be both.

After dropping Kyra off at school, I spent the rest of my half-hour drive to work recounting the events that led to where I was.

"The key for you, "I told my imaginary companion, "was Harvard. Don't you think?" I asked, but I already knew the answer. He had said that he never could have become the writer he was if he had stayed in Pennsylvania. He needed the literary culture of New England and the freedom of being away from a home where people are expected to do whatever their parents and grandparents did down to the millionth generation. "I couldn't go to Harvard," I said. "Coming from Pottsville, it was too big a jump for me. I may have had the grades, but I didn't have the confidence."

"So you stayed in Pennsylvania for college ... "

"An hour from my house," I nodded. "And then I came home and got married. I spent more time ironing and cooking than writing." My head feeling heavy with the weight of past mistakes, I propped it on my left hand with my elbow on the car door.

"It wasn't until we divorced that I finally got around to grad school, and by then I had a daughter. I couldn't run off, to New England or anywhere. So it's taken me this long just to get a teaching job where I can even *think* about writing."

"You must have had other choices," my companion said.

"Yes, other choices," I absent-mindedly echoed. As we waited at a red light, I watched the cross traffic flow smoothly in both directions in front of me. Somehow the sun glinting off the passing cars ignited an epiphany.

“It’s different for women,” I said. “I know a lot has changed, but still to this day, I think it’s different.” I raised my head and placed both hands on the wheel. “Women are always looking after someone else’s goals in place of their own. The one thing that you and O’Hara had in common, that I don’t have, is that you’re men.”

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When my composition classes were done, I sat down to grade papers for an hour. I wrote “fragment” and “run-on” in margins about thirty times and inserted possibly a hundred commas, in spite of the fact that we had just covered these issues in class. Then I got in the car to pick Kyra up from school. All the way home, she bubbled over with chatter about the book signing, the song she learned in music class, what happened at recess. As I pulled into the grocery store, the stream of talk kept flowing.

“Mom, I want to play violin.”

I took her smooth, chubby hand and led her through the parking lot.

“You remember when Jessica babysat me and she played her violin for me? I want to play violin.”

“That’s good, sweetie,” I said. “Let’s get a basket.”

“So, can I start taking lessons?” she asked as we entered the produce section.

“Well, I don’t know.”

“They even have a little orchestra at school. I see the kids coming in all the time with their instruments.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t know how old you have to be to start lessons.”

“I’m old enough,” she asserted. “I even know how a violin works.” She held out one hand and drew an imaginary bow over her shoulder with the other.

“I know you do, honey. But the teacher may only take students who are a certain age, you know.” I put a couple of ripe bananas into the basket. “Like you have to be five years old to go to kindergarten.”

“This isn’t kindergarten, mom. This is violin lessons. You don’t have to be a certain age.” She followed me to the bins of potatoes.

“Well, yes, honey. But violin lessons cost money, and I’m not sure whether we have enough to —”

“I’ll help pay for it,” she chimed, “with my allowance.”

All the way through the grocery store, I tried to help her see that violin lessons might not be possible as immediately as she would have liked. In the end, I felt that my efforts were useless, as the conversation turned to whether I would buy her a candy bar at the checkout and let her eat it right away.

After dinner, there was the homework battle, in which she claimed to be too tired to do her addition problems and write her spelling words. But when she finally got it done, the homework was all correct, as it nearly always was. I looked down a page of words printed in handwriting that could be neater than my own at that age.

After a quick bath and a couple of bedtime stories, she was tucked in at last. I had to ask myself, as I lay beside her, smoothing her baby fine hair as she drifted off, if I would trade this for anything.

Back in my room, I pulled the covers over my bent knees and balanced on them yet another book on Updike. That night, I was reading about his mom, Linda Hoyer Updike, born just outside Shillington in 1904, who aspired to write fiction herself between keeping house and raising her only child. She achieved one of her lifelong dreams in 1945 when she and her husband Wesley, a high school mathematics teacher, reinstalled her family on the farm where she had been born. The Hoyers had been forced to sell their land during the Depression, but Linda succeeded in buying it back. Educated at Ursinus College and Cornell University, she worked at a local department store after John was born, until one day when she reportedly announced, "I'm going to stay home — and become a writer."

That dream, however, would prove more elusive. Though she wrote as prolifically as her famous son, leaving behind over two hundred stories and six novels when she died in 1989, very little of her work would see publication. It was not until the age of 61 that she finally sold a story to *The New Yorker*, to which she had been a subscriber since 1944. It is said of Linda Updike that she was confident her son would be a success. But when she was interviewed about his fame, she said, "I'd rather it had been me," an honest statement if a bitter one.

Looking up from the book, I stared at the darkened window. When I looked back, Updike was sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I know why you were able to go to Harvard,” I told him softly. His eyes found mine, but I looked to the window again. “Your mom.”

“I owe a lot to her.”

“You owe her everything,” I corrected. I fingered the edge of the book in my lap. “Everything you’ve done wouldn’t have been possible without her. She’s the one who got off the farm and went to college.” I looked at him watching me quietly. “It takes two generations to raise a family to a new level,” I say, “one to begin the change and one to complete it. Your mom was that first generation.” Sitting upright, I put the book down where my companion had been sitting.

Linda Hoyer Updike, I thought, was the bridge that John Updike was able to walk across to reach his destiny. She wouldn’t have heard of him going anywhere but an Ivy League school. Her little Johnny was meant for bigger things than the farm, and she would see to it that he achieved them.

I was the first in my family ever to go to college. The *Pottsville Republican* and a shelf of Collier’s encyclopedias were all the reading material offered in my parents’ home, and I never saw my mom touch either. I have no memory of her writing more than a note to my teacher to explain an absence. But Linda Updike was a writer herself. It was her subscription to *The New Yorker* that introduced her son to the magazine that would publish so much of his work.

I didn’t have a bridge like that. At first, this realization depressed me. But then I felt strangely invigorated.

The next morning I dodged buses, vans, and double parked cars to pull into a space in front of Kyra’s school. Most parents just dropped off their kids and drove away, but our habit was for me to walk Kyra into the lobby where I got my ritual kiss and hug.

“Now, honey,” I said with my arms around her, “I put that note you asked for in your study folder, okay?”

Pulling back, she gave me a puzzled look.

“You remember, the note for the librarian to let you have the accelerated readers?”

“Oohhh.” She nodded.

“It’s in your study folder.” I kissed the top of her smooth, blonde head.

“What did you pack me for dessert?”

“Chocolate pudding.”

“Did you remember to put in a spoon?”

“Yes, I remembered the spoon.” I smiled. “And I’m going to call your music teacher today about violin lessons.”

“Oh, thank you, mommy, thank you.” With a big smile, she came back to nuzzle her head against my stomach.

Walking back to the car, I felt like a good bridge.

As I pulled away from the school, John Updike was again sitting beside me.

“I won’t have fifty books, hundreds of short stories, a Pulitzer Prize, and a page - long list of awards and fellowships,” I told him. “All I’m going to have is one daughter. And she’s going to have the world.”