"DISTANCE MAKES THE HEART GROW FONDER"

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(1) John Updike's book Too Far To Go is filled with short stories about the Maples, a typical suburban married couple. Most of the stories in Updike's book convey a feeling of sadness, a sadness beginning with the way in which the Maples have problems within their marriage. Somehow, no matter how hard they try to work out their problems, nothing ever helps. Ironically, the Maples get along better when they are apart from each other than when they are together. At the heart of their marriage is an essential incongruity or irony: their physical union in marriage tends to separate them while their physical separation appears to bring them together.

(2) The second short story of John Updike's book, "Wife-wooing," shows the readers that Richard's and Joan's marriage has developed slight problems. One night, while the Maples are in bed, Richard wants to turn off the light and get close to Joan. However, Joan wants to read her book about Richard Nixon, whom she dislikes. As Richard describes, "I lie against your filmy convex back. You read sideways, a sleepy trick. . . . Suddenly it slips. The book has slipped from your hand. You are asleep. Oh cunning trick, cunning" (p. 34). Some of the vitality and freshness has obviously escaped from their marriage.

(3) As the years pass by, though, Richard and Joan do share special, mundane moments. For instance, while Richard and Joan are usually not open with one another, they do sometimes share a special openness with each other. At one point in the short story "Sublimating," when Joan is bothered by a dream she has been having, Richard comforts her. Another special moment takes place one evening while Richard and Joan are alone: "Again he feels her heart in her body plump up, pleased. She looks at him, her eyes blue as a morning sea, and smiles" (p. 191). Although there are special moments in their marriage, the lack of freshness and vitality still persists. In this absence, indeed, couples tend to drift away from one another.

(4) Another of Updike's stories, "Giving Blood," shows us in two ways how the physical union between Richard and Joan somehow drives them apart. First, within their marriage, competition and inequality produce pressures between them. It seems as though they are always competing with one another. They constantly "take" blood from one another, constantly try to "stick" one another. An example of competition occurs when Richard and Joan go to the hospital to give blood for Joan's aunt. As he gives blood, Richard seems to make a contest out of the whole event. He is happy to find that his plastic sac fills with blood faster than Joan's does. Quickly, Joan asks, "Why was I slower than him?" (p. 50). When the young intern tells them, "Nine times out of ten, the man is faster. . . . Their hearts are so much stronger," Richard
turns to Joan and says, "Don't argue with medical science" (p. 50). Richard is now happy to feel superior to Joan, even in that sense. Each one wants the upper hand in any situation or argument. A second example of inequality takes place in a restaurant, when, after receiving the bill, Richard gets mad because he does not have enough money to pay it. In a marriage based on equality, couples should not concern themselves about paying "half" the bill; it should not matter which partner pays since husbands and wives should share everything. In her marriage, however, Joan wants both of them to pay. And, in Updike's larger sense, Richard and Joan are paying for more than coffee in a restaurant: they are paying for each other's feelings and for each other's blood. Ironically, although they are willing to go to the hospital to give (blood) to Joan's aunt, they do not give to each other. Not giving to one another in marriage causes problems between a couple—problems that tend to worsen in the long run.

(5) Still, in one beautiful image, Richard's and Joan's blood almost flows together. Richard and Joan are in the same room at the hospital, but lying in different beds. The tubes that lead their blood into a plastic sac are arranged in such a way that it appears as though their blood flows together. The blood is so close, yet so far. The same situation exists between Richard and Joan in their everyday lifestyles. At times, they are so close to being happy with one another; yet, they are so far. As Richard states in the short story "Twin Beds in Rome," "You're such a nice woman. I can't understand why I'm so miserable with you" (p. 63). In this event, Richard and Joan again share a special moment; yet, they are "miserable" with one another the majority of the time.

(6) Besides the inequality and competition that exists between them, Richard and Joan argue frequently just because they are around one another so much. Their arguments are due to the curiosity each one has concerning the spouse's affairs with other people. In "Your Lover Just Called," Richard assumes that a prank call is from Joan's lover, and in turn Joan thinks another prank call is from Richard's lover. After the calls have caused many arguments between them, the subject of lovers comes up every time they converse with one another. In fact, the subject comes up so often that Joan invents a "Red-Herring Theory." As Joan describes the theory, "The properly equipped suburban man... has a wife, a mistress, and a red-herring. The red-herring may have been his mistress once, or she may become one in the future, but he's not sleeping with her now" (p. 157). Richard and Joan begin making comments about every person each one has been associated with. Most of the time, these persons are merely acquaintances, but Richard and Joan make much more of them, assuming that they are each one's red-herring. Soon they begin wondering what each one sees in his and her red-herring. As a result, arguments and jealousy surface. Obviously, such obsession is unhealthy within a marriage.

(7) All of the elements above (the arguments, the
competition and inequality, the jealousy, and the inability of the Maples to come together as one) combine to bring about the topic of separation. Although Richard does not really want to go through with the separation, he and Joan both think that their lives would be happier without each other. The statement "Nothing lasts forever" occurs both in "Twin Beds in Rome" and in "Separating," Updike's clue for the reader that Richard and Joan both know that their marriage will not last forever.

(8) After the actual separation, Richard and Joan both go through phases of adjustment and unhappiness without one another. Before Richard actually leaves his family, he finishes a few chores that need to be done. As he stands outside observing his home, Richard realizes that he is actually leaving: "... the windward side of the house was shielding flakes of paint, rain would get in when he was gone, insects, rot, death" (p. 196). These fears indicate that Richard wants to stay and protect his family. After finally relocating to Boston, Richard has difficulty adjusting without Joan. Even his mistress, Ruth, makes him realize that there are qualities in Joan which he misses dearly. For example, while taking Joan and the kids out for dinner one evening, Richard and Joan talk about Ruth. He tells Joan, "... she's not real to me, the way--you are" (p. 227). At this point in the separation, Richard is the emotional one, whereas Joan is the reasonable one. She is content with the way things are working out in her life. Richard, on the other hand, wants Joan back. However, the situation changes a year and a half after they have been living apart. This time, as Joan talks to Richard, she "sat crouched on what had been their bed, telling him, between sobs, of her state of mind, which was suicidal, depressive, beaten ... her body was a great unhealed wound crying 'come back'" (p. 232). Much sadness is in the air as Richard and Joan are trying to figure out why things happen the way they do. Both seem at fault: Joan has never really been open about her love for Richard, and Richard admits, "If I'd been better at knowing what you feel like, we might not have come to this." Then he adds, "But we have come to it. Now let go" (p. 235).

(9) On the day of the divorce, Richard and Joan's dissolution is described as an "irretrievable breakdown" in which there is "no-fault." When the judge asks them whether or not they believe that their marriage has suffered an irretrievable breakdown, Richard and Joan each answer "I do" (p. 256). After the judge wishes them luck and grants their divorce, "Joan and Richard stepped back from the bench in unison and stood side by side, uncertain of how to turn, until Richard at last remembered what to do; he kissed her" (p. 256). The scene of their divorce echoes the scene of their wedding: they both stand side by side, say the words "I do," step back from the bench (altar), and end in a kiss. Because Richard forgot to kiss Joan during their actual wedding, his act of kissing Joan in court really does complete their marriage.

(10) Clearly, the Maples' physical union in marriage tends to separate them, while physical separation appears
to bring them closer to one another. One critic calls Too Far To Go "the haunting story of a marriage that began with love—and ended with love. . . ." Richard and Joan Maple do love each other, even after their divorce. The familiar saying, "Distance makes the heart grow fonder," is, in the Maples' case, very true. At least Richard and Joan will always know that they do love one another no matter what happened in their lives in the past.