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## Three Writers on “Trust Me”

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This section of the *JUR* provides space for three invited writers to compose responses to a single Updike story, novel, poem, or essay. The objective is to bring attention to a range of Updike’s writings, particularly ones that have been neglected, and to provide a forum in which a range of writers—critics, scholars, fiction writers, editors—seek to better understand an individual work.

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# Updike's "Trust Me": Of Anthologies, Indifference, and Dollar Bills

D. QUENTIN MILLER

When I was in graduate school, at the dawn of the Information Age, the literary anthology was still something of a sacred text. These ponderous tomes on onion-skin paper were repositories of required reading: if a story was anthologized, it had to be something worth preserving and re-presenting. The canon wars were still raging, but the literary anthology was slow to change. My dissertation advisor edited the most successful literary anthology on the market, and I watched in fascination as he prepared new editions, adding new works only conservatively, being careful not to get rid of the texts that instructors loved to teach. He and his publisher were mindful of the practical demands faced by the adopters of the text: to prepare a new lesson takes time. Maybe this is one reason high school students are still reading *The Great Gatsby* and *The Catcher in the Rye*: fine novels, but the same ones that have been taught for years.

Updike's anthology piece has long been "A & P" (1960). Without denigrating that story, I think many of my colleagues would agree that it's not representative of Updike's oeuvre as a whole. It doesn't showcase his most persistent themes and concerns. Plus, most of his stories aren't in the first person. His second most frequently anthologized story, "Separating" (1974), is much closer to the mark if one wants a fair representation of his work. The sense of existential doom at the story's conclusion is as powerful a confession as Updike ever wrote. If anything, as a representative piece, it's too heavy, lacking the clever wit and linguistic play that underpins much of his work. "A & P" makes the reader grin; "Separating" feels like a swift kick to the gut.

I joined the editorial board of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* in 2000, eager to make some changes. The *Heath* was the canon-expanding rival to the staid *Norton Anthology*, and the other editors were happy to entertain any suggestions I might have for new works in the contemporary section, which was my domain. I chose “Trust Me” (1979) over “A & P” and “Separating,” hopeful that instructors would recognize its value. In my mind, Updike’s writing in the late 1970s and 1980s was firing on all cylinders. *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), and *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) are three of his best novels, *Hugging the Shore* (1983) demonstrates his virtuosity as a reviewer and essayist, and the stories in *Trust Me* (1987) are consistently excellent. The title story takes on two of his signature themes (generational angst as a son becomes a father, and the guilty pleasures of adultery) in an economical way. The story progresses through emotional highs and lows quickly without leaving out any important details. As well as he does it in any other story, Updike reveals a character’s psychological and spiritual problems without offering easy solutions.

When my fellow editors asked, “Why this story?” I used the story’s title as the answer to the question. I knew it worked in the classroom. When I was invited to give the dreaded “job talk” at my current institution, I selected it as my primary text. The talk was really a teaching presentation. This was in 2000: “smart” classrooms hadn’t arrived yet. I came armed with photocopies of “Trust Me” and overhead transparencies (raise your hand if you remember them) of news headlines from the week the story appeared in the *New Yorker* as well as contemporaneous cartoons from the magazine. I also brought interpretations of the iconography on the back of the dollar bill furnished by the Department of the Treasury. Finally, I brought a stack of one-dollar bills.

For that is where the story ends: on the back of a dollar bill. The protagonist stares at it, confused, befuddled by the drug-laced brownie working its way through his system. His lover has just declared, “I don’t think it’s funny. I don’t think *any* of you are funny” (93),\* but there is something funny about the scene, the type of humor that a deadly serious story like “Separating” keeps at bay. Here is a middle-aged man suffering from many of the typical Updikean problems: a divided personality that can be traced back to his parents, a crisis of faith, and a troubled relationship both to the family he has abandoned and to the woman who has replaced them.

\* Page references to “Trust Me” are to the text as reprinted in this issue of *The John Updike Review*, which is the text used in *Collected Later Stories*, ed. Christopher Carduff (New York: Library of America, 2013).

He's stoned, but the reader knows that the effects of the brownie won't last. In the meantime, where can he turn for answers?

His text is the dollar bill in his pocket, and only Updike could turn such a mundane object into an expansive context for Harold's crisis.

There it is: the basic unit of our currency. The symbol of American might and power. But look more closely, Updike urges. The front bears a famous image of our best known Founding Father, tinted green to suggest fertility, with flora adorning the sides for emphasis. It is a legal looking document, with seals, dates, and signatures all over it. "One" is represented multiple times in both numbers and letters. Other numbers and letters attest to the note's origins, its date of issue, its authenticity. A dollar is really just an idea, a government-backed promise that its exchange will allow commerce to be completed. A leap of faith, really; a trick of trust. But as bills, in our hands, dollars become things, not just ideas. For Harold in "Trust Me," a dollar seems the only solid thing in a very unstable world.

The front of a dollar bill is complex and significant enough, but the reverse is a riot of mysterious symbols and words, many in Latin, that give it further weight. In the story's final sentence, Harold "turned to its back side, examined the mystical eye above the truncated pyramid, and read, over and over, the slogan printed above the ONE" (93). That slogan is, of course, "In God we trust," and in terms of the story it creates ripples, then waves, of irony. Who is "we" at a moment when Harold feels so profoundly alone, alienated from both his family and his lover? What is God suddenly doing in a story that has been about swimming, air travel, and skiing? And finally that word *trust*, applied variously throughout the story: to a father who doesn't catch his son when he jumps into a pool, to a pilot who is unable to coax a plane to ascend, to a man trying to fix his daughter's braces with pliers, and to that same man insensitive or naive enough to terrify his lover on the slopes and turn her away from skiing for life. Trust in this story is about powerful and occasionally cruel patriarchs.

"In God we trust." Just a slogan, perhaps, but Harold plies it for meaning. There's that mysterious floating "mystical" eye above the unfinished pyramid. This is part of the Great Seal of the United States, one side of it the stern, shielded eagle gripping both the olive branch of peace and a clutch of arrows, holding in its mouth a banner reading "E Pluribus Unum": *From many come one*. One nation. The "we" of the slogan. More Latin surrounding the cryptic pyramid: "Annuet Coeptis" and "Novus Ordo Seclorum": *He has favored our undertakings* and *A new order for the ages*. The pyramid is our nation: solid, but unfinished. The eye is God's: He is watching over us.

That's the official interpretation of these words and symbols, but what do they mean to Harold, who recalls when his lover hangs up the phone with a click the swift slap his mother gave his father when Harold nearly drowned as a child (which was also difficult for him to interpret)? Looking at a dollar bill and reflecting on the story, a reader should wonder whether Harold feels any connection to anyone, much less to his country as a whole. The back of the bill implies unity: In God *we* trust, He has favored *our* undertakings, from many come *one*. The word *one*, as Updike notes, is huge on the back of the dollar bill, and repeated there no fewer than six times, but it can signify two opposite things: oneness and isolation. As Harold stares at the slogan, stoned, he is no doubt wondering about the truth of all these words swimming through his consciousness: *one, we, God, trust*. What do any of them mean?

The story is ostensibly about trust, but it's equally about leaps of faith. The dust jacket of the hardcover edition of *Trust Me* depicts an etching of the fall of Icarus, who looks skyward while plummeting earthward. Updike's story has the young Harold plummeting into a pool only to be lifted up again by his father. Harold and his wife ride in a plane that fails to climb and the voice of the pilot is meant to comfort them, to lift them up. When Harold becomes the authority figure, he realizes the true nature of this dynamic. As he wields the pliers to fix his daughter's braces, he accuses her: "'You don't trust me.' The gaiety of his voice revealed a crucial space, a gap between their situations: it would be his blunder, but her pain. Another's pain is not our own. Religion, he supposed, seeks to close this gap, but each generation's torturers keep it open. Without it, compassion would crush us; the space of indifference is where we breathe" (90). In the etching, Daedalus flies away as Icarus falls, indifferent. Indifference, Harold suggests, is the precise midpoint between compassion and torture.

This insight has something to do with God, but also with government. The sacred text at the story's conclusion is a dollar bill, not a Bible. The implication is that one must take an irrational leap of faith if one is to trust God or the government, and also that God and the government are indifferent to our anxieties. The story was published in the July 16, 1979, issue of the *New Yorker*, just weeks after the energy crisis erupted. The magazine's cartoons that month reveal anxiety over the gas shortages that roiled the nation at the time. In one, an executive in the oil industry asks his colleague, "Just between us, Don, *are* we ripping off the public?" This is more evidence of the powerful, cruel, nearly indifferent patriarchs that rule Harold's world. Did our elected officials act the same way, especially in

the aftermath of the Watergate scandal which led to a widespread loss of trust in government? The 1980 presidential election pitted the gentle, avuncular Carter against the tough, charismatic Reagan, whose trustworthiness was considerably compromised by his background as a screen actor.

The story brilliantly and economically opens up space for a broad cultural reading of trust. God and government lurk on the dollar bill as the key to the story's implications, and like the dollar bill, they are unusually complex signifiers. Like all of Updike's best work, "Trust Me" deals with subjects familiar and mundane, but the story's layers are manifold. The comical image of a headstrong middle-aged man who has glibly ingested a drug-laced dessert balances his pathetic plea to his lover: "Help me" (93). She refuses. Trust is hard to come by in this story, and its protagonist is left every bit as alone as Sammy in "A & P" or Richard Maple in "Separating." No one knows where to turn next: all these stories end with a frightening paralysis.

I'm not sure that "Trust Me" has gotten its due. In the most recent edition of the *Heath* we replaced it with "Varieties of Religious Experience" (2002) as we developed a section on post-9/11 literature. I hope it comes back, just as I hope literature anthologies come back, just as I hope dollar bills aren't fully replaced by even less substantial currency. In the age of PayPal and Bitcoin the story might eventually make a little less sense, but I am encouraged by the fact that paper does not seem to be disappearing in our electronic age.

# Asking My Students to Jump in the Deep End: The Misleading Focal Event of John Updike’s “Trust Me”

DANIEL PAUL

It never ceases to amaze me how much trust my creative writing students seem to have in me. I see it in their eyes in the classroom, where I need only scribble something onto the blackboard and they will scurry to record it in their notebooks, as if *drama* or *objective correlative* will be the password required of them to enter heaven. I see it in their earnest drafts, which respond (disproportionately) to didactic mandates like “add more conflict” by bringing down the ten undergraduate fiction plagues (death of firstborn puppies, etc.) upon their unfortunate characters. I see it in their charitable yet premature chuckles in response to my jokes.

It is at times astounding that my small standing—I am listed in the course offerings as “Instructor” alongside such luminaries as “Staff” and “TBA”—and my limited juridical authority to assign them grades are enough to generate such trust in these fairly bright and critically curious young adults.

In fact, the only thing more incredible than this inexplicably accrued trust is how strong my impulse is to abuse it.

This impulse predates my time as a teacher. Ten years ago, as a summer camp counselor, I could not resist telling the campers in the middle of the night that it was time to wake up, crediting the pitch-black sky to a surprise solar eclipse. Whether or not this was an unhealthy response to my own traumas of gullibility inflicted by my older brother—point of fact: my parents were *not* feeding me dolphin sandwiches—and whether or not the Popsicles I gave the traumatized

nine-year-olds in my charge to buy their silence iced over the pain of their betrayal are questions for another day. But, a decade later, standing in front of a room of freshmen, I am still a bit corrupted by the small amount of authority I have over them, and tempted into small acts of pedagogical cheek.

For example: I assign my students to each write a story that takes as its model John Updike's "Trust Me."

Simple enough, right? I tell them to write a story that begins with a focal event for a character that will prove important enough to affect that character years later. In "Trust Me," this event is an outing to a swimming pool.

Harold, age "three or four" (87),\* is coaxed by his father to jump in the pool despite his fear of the water. This fear proves justified as his father does not catch him before "the blue-green water was all around him, dense and churning, and when he tried to take a breath a fist was shoved into his throat." He is rescued by his father, but the "unhappy day" (87) is not over before his mother slaps his father for his negligence, and Harold, "[s]tanding wrapped in a towel near his mother's knees while the last burning fragments of water were coughed from his lungs, . . . felt eternally disgraced" (88). The story then jumps energetically forward in time, moving Harold briskly into adulthood and parenthood, dropping out of summary and into scene to show four instances of trust (and its betrayal) characteristic of his life and relationships:

- a harrowingly turbulent plane ride with his first wife where Harold assuages her fears with transparently hollow reassurances;
- an exercise in amateur orthodontic work on his skeptical (and suffering) daughter;
- a ski trip with his inexperienced girlfriend, Priscilla, where he misleads her into going beyond her comfort zone;
- an incident in which his son tricks him into eating a hash brownie.

The story then concludes with a final kind of trust, as Harold, who has been rejected in a time of need by Priscilla, finds a dollar bill in his shirt pocket and is mesmerized by it: "he turned to its back side, examined the mystical eye above the truncated pyramid, and read, over and over, the slogan printed above the ONE" (93): "In God we trust," for those readers who don't like to carry cash.

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In each of these four primary incidents, the narration draws an explicit parallel between the initial trauma of the pool and the subsequent betrayal. Whether we read the story as a kind of cynical coming of age where Harold loses his innocence and changes from having his trust betrayed to betraying the trust of others, or as an almost classic tragedy where Harold receives his comeuppance, betrayed by his son just as he betrayed his lovers and daughter, the inciting incident for the story's conflict is the poolside disgrace.

So (I say to my students), now you do the same. See how a single scene can mark a character for life. And, whether it is me that they trust to guide them or Updike, they hop to it, one and all.

Let's get big picture here: forget my students; it is pretty astounding that *anyone* trusts *anyone*. Our lives seem populated with nothing but empirical evidence of inevitable betrayal. In the middle of "Trust Me," Updike is able to articulate a root of this painful reality with impressive precision. In this scene, Harold's daughter resists his inept orthodontic ministrations:

He gaily accused her, "you don't trust me." The gaiety of his voice revealed a crucial space, a gap between their situations: it would be his blunder, but her pain. Another's pain is not our own. Religion, he supposed, seeks to close this gap, but each generation's torturers keep it open. Without it, compassion would crush us; the space of indifference is where we breathe. (90)

This unbridgeable gap between the self and the other, articulated here as Harold's epiphany, is confirmed more scientifically by the classic "prisoner's dilemma," where the math tells us that regardless of whether or not the man in the adjacent cell plans to betray you, it is advantageous for you to betray him. We see a similarly depressing reality when considering Garrett Hardin's article "The Tragedy of the Commons," where the farmer who overgrazes his sheep on communal land (and who among us has not been tempted?) gains 100 percent of the advantage from the transgression but suffers only a fraction of the long-term cost, which is divided equally among all members of the community. Again and again we see there is simply no mathematical upside in trust, and while there can be great benefit in convincing others to trust you, there is very little to be gained in reciprocating.

And yet, despite the simple game theory of deception and the undeniable asymmetry inherent in trusting, we do it *all the time*. We trust our parents, even though by virtue of their being human they are certain to betray us with their fallibility. We trust in our parents, comically, even though a core component of their

message is that we *should not* trust most people (strangers giving out candy being the Willie Horton of their campaign to win our skepticism). We trust government, even if a part of that trust is built on its inherent untrustworthiness. (I think here of *Deadwood's* Al Swearengen remarking on his toady, Farnum, "I wouldn't trust a man who wouldn't try to steal a little." Nothing is more unsettling than a public official who does not come off as a little corrupt, as it begs the question of what his angle is.) We trust in God, not only in spite of a lack of evidence, but, it seems, *because* of this absence, as a deity who would stoop to proving his existence to the masses would deny believers the miracle of faith. From the micro to the macro, societies are built on collective trust, even in the face of its fundamental illogic.

And stranger perhaps than any of these leaps are the constructs to which we often give our most unconditional and perhaps ill-advised trust: the writer and her stories.

In a 2001 review of *Licks of Love*, critic James Wood accuses Updike of this very weakness: literary credulity. Writing broadly about Updike's language and narrative stance, Wood argues that "Updike does not appear to believe that words ever fail us . . . and part of the difficulty he has run into, late in his career, is that he shows no willingness, verbally, to acknowledge silence, failure, interruption, loss of faith, despair and so on" (Wood 31). And while I trust James Wood on the broader Updike canon, I am forced to ask how closely he has looked at "Trust Me." Because though Wood argues that "[f]or some time now Updike's language has seemed to encode an almost theological optimism about its capacity to refer" (31), "Trust Me," as I read it, is deeply skeptical of the ability of representation, be it language, narrative, or memory, to convey any stable or useful meaning.

This skepticism begins with its title, "trust me" being an example of language which undermines itself the moment it is uttered. Like a gas station that brags about its clean bathrooms, the moment someone asks to be trusted he is calling attention to the fact that trust is not implicit. And because trust is binary—while the first nine gas station bathrooms on your road trip may prove immaculate, it only takes the tenth to sap you of any confidence for the eleventh—even the partial erosion of trust embedded in the request for it disrupts it completely.

There is also an incantatory and deconstructive quality to the phrase "trust me," a musicality to the request that veers toward the hypnotic. Whether this musicality completely erodes the phrase's meaning—the sound of the signifier replacing the signified—or instead suggests a kind of deal with the Devil where the literal meaning will be upheld while the actual meaning is betrayed,<sup>1</sup> the inflection of

“trust me” carries as much weight, if not more, than the meaning of the words.

Lastly, the title is “Trust *Me*,” not “Let’s Trust *Each Other*.” Again, we have built into the syntax the inherent asymmetry of trust: “Another’s pain is not our own. . . . Without [this gap], compassion would crush us; the space of indifference is where we breathe.”

This quality of self-erosion is what makes this title so pleasingly devilish. Titles are unavoidably a metafictional construct, whether the character has the agency to create it and is therefore flagged with writing her own story, or an authorial presence has the power and is forced to reveal her existence by titling the story. This title, which is also tellingly the title of the collection the story was published in, winks to the fact that Updike is asking us to trust him, as every writer asks every reader who enters the fictional world on the page.

And with this question of trust for the author in mind, it is hard not to see the plight of young Harold in a different light, for as much as we may want to say that Harold’s mistake or tragedy was to trust his somewhat negligent father in the pool, the father has nothing on Updike for negligence. In fact, their interests are highly aligned; both want to throw Harold in the water and see if he will “[s]ink or swim” (88). But Updike does not stop there. Think of all he exposes poor Harold to just in the way he narrates time. The story jumps through Harold’s life, stopping only at the moments where he betrays or is betrayed. This greatest hits of failed trust seems especially cruel considering the more frequent pattern in Updike’s work to focus on smaller bursts of time in greater detail, often doubling back to the same characters at different points in their lives for additional stories. Not so for Harold. Look even at the first reference to his wife: “His first wife dreaded flying” (88). The marriage is over in its first sentence!<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Harold is not the victim in this story—I think that award is a four-way tie between all the women in the story—but his folly is not that of trusting his father, or his son, or even of betraying the trust of (literally) every woman we meet; no, in keeping with the theme of challenging the possibility of stable meaning and representation, Harold’s great mistake is trusting in *memory*, and in trusting his ability to construct meaning from his own perception.

Consider the first line: “When Harold was three or four, his father and mother took him to a swimming pool” (87). Three *or* four. From the outset, the memory is unstable.

The story continues, framing the focal event, “Harold had no memory of ever seeing his parents in bathing suits again, after this unhappy day. What he did remember was this: . . .” (87). Even as we are being prepared to see the key incident,

it is established that there are limits to Harold's memory, and aspects of the scene that he will not recall.

The scene then builds to the mother slapping the father, a slap that will be referred to at the end of the story: "The slap seemed to resonate all over the pool area, and to be heard by all the other bathers; but perhaps this was the acoustics of memory" (87–88). This theme of incomplete memory of the pool trauma is cemented in the next paragraph: "He never knew what had happened; by the time he asked, so many years had passed that his father had forgotten" (88).

And yet, despite not having a complete memory of the event (as if such a thing is possible), Harold attempts to construct meaning from it. He consistently refers back to the incident during the other scenes of trust and betrayal, and he concludes with a direct reference to the slap at the pool. After Priscilla rejects his pleas for help in the throes of a hash brownie high, the story establishes the parallel between end and beginning:

Priscilla . . . hung up. The click sounded like a slap, the same echoing slap that had once exploded next to his ear. Except that his father had become his son, and his mother was his girl friend. This much remained true: it had not been his fault, and in surviving he was somehow blamed. (93)

Oh, Harold. Rather than taking him at his word and reading this as the culmination of a circular arc in which Harold has ended up where he began, I see the larger point as that he has constructed his own narrative from faulty parts, which is to say memories. Any sense of causality in the story, skillfully baited by Updike, is logically absurd. None of Harold's behavior is justified by his first experience of having his trust betrayed, any more than dropping an ice-cream cone on the sidewalk as a child is a legal defense for securities fraud. The role of the author is to arrange plot and establish causality, only here we have a story that mocks the very kinds of causal narratives that we attempt to build from memory. Whether the story's ending is pointing to God as the only kind of trust we can rely on or mocking Harold for one last error in judgment is irrelevant, because Harold's failure has nothing to do with trusting others, but in trusting his own ability to construct meaning.

Which is why after my students have written their emulation of "Trust Me," I pull my switch on them. I tell them that they have to take their story about a focal event that was pivotal to a character's life—lost virginity, dog run over, prom date betrayal, etc.—and write a draft in which that character is completely wrong, in which that focal event proves ultimately trivial. What I am in effect asking them to do is to forsake empathy entirely at a time when it is most difficult to do so,

as more often than not their character's pivotal life event is autobiographical; in essence, I am asking them to negate the empathy they have with themselves.

While this may seem a bit callous, I think Updike suggests the potential for it when he finds the strange ray of hope in refusing trust. When Harold thinks that "the space of indifference is where we breathe," I wonder if Updike is not speaking about the process of writing itself. We think so often of writing as a space of empathy, of embodying our characters, but there is a freedom to indifference, and a price for compassion on the page. As I scribble on the board that stories are, as the writer Ben Marcus tells us, "technologies of heartbreak," it seems imperative that this technology act on the reader as much as the characters, and that we recognize as writers that one of the chief engines of heartbreak for our characters is to instill them with the delusion that they understand their own stories.

All in all, perhaps what I am saying is that I wouldn't trust a writer who wouldn't try to lie to me a little.

#### NOTES

1. An example of this can be found in what is, oddly, the most popular cultural referent for the phrase "trust me": *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. In the 1991 film, the character of John Connor tries to humanize Arnold Schwarzenegger's killing machine, using his ability to command the Terminator to forbid him from killing any humans. Later, when they are surrounded by cops, the Terminator leaves John to engage the police and create an escape route. John screams, "You promised," to which Arnold wryly replies, "Trust me." While he is true to his word and kills none of the human police, he does shoot most of them in the kneecaps and blows up the cars around them. The audience reaction is to applaud and laugh (the machine found a loophole), but one does have to wonder if Arnold really obeyed the spirit of John Connor's order to preserve life, or if in obeying the letter he betrayed Connor's trust.

2. Though perhaps Updike's larger canon and life suggests that, like the phrase "trust me," he views marriage vows as words that undercut their own meaning through being uttered.

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# Updike's "Trust Me": A Writer's Account, a Reader's Doubt

MICAL DARLEY

*Unaccountably*: when employed by a storyteller, the word is either a wink or an evasion. A story, after all, is exactly an account, however impressionistic. But near the beginning of "Trust Me," Updike's narrator tells us that after Harold (our protagonist) is dropped in a public pool by his father, "[u]naccountably, all through his growing up he continued to trust his father; it was his mother he distrusted, her swift sure-handed anger" (88).\*

And that is the conclusion of the story's primary anecdote. Updike's narrator does not unpack "unaccountably" further, and does not challenge it later. But the word haunts Harold's tale, the ghost of an idea killed too soon. And by refusing an autopsy of this origin story, Updike himself plays with the trust of his reader. It seems a cheap narrative trick to call attention to a detail and then claim it cannot be explained. The writer has put the detail in, after all, and can account for it if he wants to.

Of course, writers and narrators are not one and the same—and by introducing narrative unreliability, narrative uncertainty, perhaps Updike means to step away from his narrator. But soon the narrative voice will proclaim in a way that seems suspiciously authorial. Consider the following, a few pages later, as Harold attempts to fix his daughter's braces and reacts to her fear:

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He gaily accused her, “You don’t trust me.” The gaiety of his voice revealed a crucial space, a gap between their situations: it would be his blunder, but her pain. Another’s pain is not our own. Religion, he supposed, seeks to close this gap, but each generation’s torturers keep it open. Without it, compassion would crush us; the space of indifference is where we breathe. (90)

To this point, “Trust Me” has been related in the past tense, but here the narrator breaks quickly from past (“his voice revealed a crucial space”) and conditional (“it would be . . . her pain”) to present (“Another’s pain is not our own”). This tense switch takes us out of the narrative specific and into the universal present, the tense of critical and philosophical claim. Updike delays the claim’s link to Harold’s thoughts, so that by the time the reader gets to the “he supposed” tag (“Religion, he supposed, seeks to close this gap”), it functions as a mere glance back to the narrative, to the past tense of story. “He supposed” seems almost an afterthought, a light basting to connect Harold with what the author really wants to tell us. Had Updike wanted to attach this claim more securely to Harold’s narrative, he might have used it a sentence earlier, thus avoiding the tense break altogether (as it’s normal for characters living in the past to think and talk in the present). But Updike doesn’t introduce the declaration as Harold’s musing. Instead, he suspends it mid-paragraph like a hypertext. Updike’s characteristic moral grappling engages hard here. Earlier, the narrative voice stuck out through its very avoidance of certainty (“unaccountably”); now it speaks not only with certainty but with an omniscient grandeur, pointing not just toward but precisely *to* a metaphysical explanation of trust from the other side of the transaction, from the side of the trusted—or, as Updike calls him, the torturer.

Indifference is freedom, Updike writes; it is “where we breathe,” a fortress against the crush of compassion. Ironically, the narrator does display compassion here, in the word’s root sense of shared feeling, but it is not Harold’s daughter with whom the narrator co-feels. Rather, Harold’s “gaiety” mirrors his father’s blithe humor about Harold’s childhood incident in the pool: “‘Wasn’t that a crying shame,’ the old man said, with his mild mixture of mournfulness and comedy. ‘Sink or swim, and you sank’” (88). Similarly, Harold takes his daughter’s fear lightly, and, “with his clumsy fingers in her mouth,” blames her when things go awry. He hears a “necessary indifference . . . in his own reassurances as he bestowed them. ‘Sweetie, I know you’re feeling pressure now, but if you’ll just hold *still* . . . there’s this little sharp end—oops. Well, you wriggled.’” The narrative voice transparently tells us that “Harold had heard this [same] necessary indifference” not only in “his

father's voice urging 'Jump,'" but in the pilot's voice as he communicated about a failing starboard engine on a flight Harold took with his ex-wife (90). The narrator believes not only that this indifference *does* exist, but that it *must*; this is a claim of empathy with the torturer, a belief in the necessity of an emotional device (indifference) to protect Harold from the consequences of his own behavior (pain, endangerment). Harold and the narrator both seem to believe that a torturer requires such protection in order to function at all. Harold's father needs it to introduce his son to the joys of swimming; Harold needs it to free his daughter from the sharp wire; the pilot needs it to bring the plane out of harm's way. (It is interesting to note, and perhaps fodder for another essay, that every torturer in "Trust Me" is male.)

In addition to his indifference, a bit of lighthearted victim-blaming protects the torturer from the full impact of his responsibility. We don't particularly see this in the pilot's case, but we do in the case of Harold's father ("you sank") and in Harold himself as he relates to his daughter ("you wriggled"). Later, we see it in Harold's interaction with his girlfriend, Priscilla. In fact, Harold lies about trust in order to transfer blame from himself to her. When he takes Priscilla, a beginning skier, "to the top of a mountain" too early, he immediately admits to himself that "[s]he trusted him," but when the experience sours, he denies this out loud to others (90, 91). "I tried to give her a treat," he says to her children (who have been "waiting at the edge of the emptying parking lot with tears in their eyes"), "but your mother doesn't trust me" (91).

This last case study, the skiing incident, gets more page time than any other and deserves some analysis, partly because Priscilla's resistance to her torturer, expressed through dialogue, provides one of the only narrative challenges to Harold and the narrator's assumptions. The other trusters in the story stay fairly silent, with the narrator mostly talking for them through summary. But Priscilla speaks up in expressions of escalating fear and resistance: first with "Can I really ski this?" ("with a child's beautiful willingness to be reassured"); then with "I can't do it"; and again with "There isn't any snow . . . Just ice" (90, 91). Finally, after Harold has alternately cajoled her ("He gathered all his love into his voice and rolled it toward her, to melt her recalcitrance, her terror") and yelled at her ("You *must*. Goddamn it, it's *simple*"), she screams, "Simple for *you* . . . I *hate* you . . . I can't do it, I *can't* do it! I was so *proud* on the baby slope, all I wanted was for you to *watch* me—watch me for one lousy minute, that was all I asked you to do. You *knew* I wasn't ready for this. *Why* did you bring me up here, *why*?" (91).

This is the only time in "Trust Me" that a truster confronts the trustee (or, in

Updike's lexicon, the torturer) who has failed her. Harold's answer, the *why* that he gives—is that he thought she was ready: "I wanted to show you the view." This seems somewhat honest, but he also says it "weakly" (91)—because a page and a half earlier, he had already admitted to knowing disaster awaited. "[A] tremulous doubt entered into her face," the narrator tells us, "and he realized, with that perversely joyful inner widening the torturer feels, that he had done the wrong thing" (90).

Perhaps, since they're already on the chair lift, Harold believes it's too late to do anything about his mistake. But that "perversely joyful inner widening," seen through the lens of his earlier reference to the freedoms of the torturer, also indicates a pleasure in his immunity to the coming fear, a pleasure in the ample run of his indifference. By contrast, Priscilla's vulnerability is a narrow drag. Updike's descriptive choices cast it as limiting to the point of being babyish. In fact, the word "baby" gets used five times, not just to describe the kids' slope and chair lift where Priscilla wants to stay, but also her "baby blue" eyes (90). She is further infantilized. She "kick[s] her feet like an infant in a tantrum" (91); her eyes are "obedient" (90); and we've already noted her "child's beautiful willingness to be reassured." And though she is "old enough to have her own children," her age pulls a Benjamin Button; she's "old enough to feel fragile," like Harold and his daughter were as children (90). Moreover, when Harold first meets her on the slope, he "swoop[s] down upon her in a smart spray of snow," sounding a bit like a predator, or, at least, a bit like a show-off. He contrasts the freedoms of his dexterity with Priscilla's dependence. Her attempts to show off to *him* are refused except on condition that she follow him to the peak: "If you can snowplow here, you can come down from the top of the mountain" (90). Harold disregards her fears as he disregards his daughter's, as the pilot and his father and, later, his son, disregard his.

But I do not mean to paint Harold as an unmitigated bully. For it *is* true that the view is beautiful from the top of the mountain. Freedom, which indifference allows, begets beauty. And, with some stunning craft, Updike shows us this through color. From the aquamarine of the childhood pool to the alpine greens and blues of the big ski mountain to, later, the "thoughts . . . vividly polychrome, like campaign ribbons" promoted by the consumption of his son's hash brownie (92), the color in Harold's surroundings comes alive at unstable moments. The vulnerable truster encounters beauty when he or she encounters danger, which seems to vivify the world. Updike makes this connection quite clear for us: after Harold talks to Priscilla of the mountain view, the narrator muses that Harold's father, similarly, "had wanted to give him the joy of the water, no doubt" (90).

So the torturer is not just a torturer, but in some ways a teacher, about the pleasures of the world as well as its dangers. And, in the end, this is the story's only explanation, its only *account*, of why Harold trusts his father. Though perhaps *trust* is ultimately (and ironically, considering the story's title) the wrong word. Perhaps, in a realm where trust has been shown to be dysfunctional—limited as it is by indifference—we mistake liking for trusting. Harold *likes* his father, because his father shows him beauty.

Adventure—leaping into pools, climbing mountains, flying overseas, doing drugs—is a part of that beauty, and indifference is a part of adventure, because it numbs the adventurer to adventure's risk. Updike tells us, as Priscilla and Harold slowly descend the mountain on foot, that “[t]een-aged experts bombed past in an avalanche of heedless color” (91). If beauty is risk, then heedlessness enables it. And humor is also a part of that beauty, a way of encountering adventure that lowers the stakes of risk. A kind of art, a kind of beauty, a kind of color in itself. The way that Updike tells it, humor is also a way of promoting and expressing indifference: Harold's father's; Harold's own; Harold's son's, when the boy “smile[s] cherubically” and urges, “Hash brownies. Have one, Dad. . . . It's just something the other kids cooked up for me as a joke. It's more the idea of it; they won't do anything” (92).

Humor also protects the truster from vulnerability. It's a protective measure against embarrassment. If we turn back to the story's first anecdote, we see that Harold endures a dread of “exposure” (87)—not exposure to danger, but to discomfiture. Though he never recovers his taste for swimming—“the chemical scent of a pool always frightened him”—he retains far more disgust for the “public embarrassment” that he links to his mother's reaction to his endangerment, her slap of his father, her “swift sure-handed anger” in response to the incident (88). Though his mother seems to be attempting to protect him (albeit post-hoc), Harold seems to feel no comfort as “he passe[s] from his father's wet arms into his mother's dry ones”; already, before the fall, he had been aware of “his own white skin,” which is described in a language of overexposure similar to what Updike uses for Harold's mother's skin: “a black bathing suit . . . made her flesh appear very white” (88, 87).

After the fall, Harold's embarrassment commingles with that “sparkling nakedness”; when he chooses to trust his father over his mother, he seems to prefer exposure to danger over exposure to such naked “disgrace” (88).

And I wonder at that: why does Harold find his mother's slap, which “seemed to resonate all over the pool area, and to be heard by all the other bathers” (87–88), so disturbing? I write this not out of insensitivity to the mal-effects of physical

violence, but rather with sensitivity to the scene's physical context: Harold has just come close to drowning. Surely drowning is a more violent physical experience than hearing a slap. And his mother's mama-bear reaction is the only act of advocacy in the story (besides the self-advocacy of Priscilla, which Updike's narrator infantilizes—perhaps because it reminds Harold of this childhood incident). Often, advocacy garners trust and allegiance. Yet this is the only act that inspires *distrust* in Harold. The narrator began the story by telling us that there was no accounting for this, but perhaps we can forge ahead anyway—perhaps Updike means us to.

Advocacy stems from compassion. And the narrator has told us compassion is crushing. Instead, Harold prefers the freedom of indifference. But there is no indifference in the slap. No “space [to] breathe” (90). No minimizing, via humor or heedlessness; no embrace of risk or adventure. The slap fully acknowledges, and even embarrassingly exposes, Harold's father's endangerment of his son.

And so Harold rejects it. He recoils, in fact. He considers himself humiliated, “eternally disgraced.” He hears it loudly throughout his life; in “the acoustics of memory,” the narrator tells us it resonates (88).

But in Harold's story gender resonates too, and I can't remove that resonance from my reading of this scene. It seems significant that Harold's mother's body, “off in a corner of his mind,” is a bit abject, with its colorless flesh (87). Her protective reaction, which she is given no chance to explain (Harold's father does get that chance), gets dismissed as misdirected “anger” (88), an anger bordering on old-fashioned hysteria (or, perhaps, a child's tantrum, like the one the narrator tells us Priscilla had). It seems significant that, on the malfunctioning plane so many years later, the behavior of Harold's wife reminds him so strongly of his mother, even though his wife, in this reader's opinion, acts very differently. Despite the fact that she “dreaded flying” (88), she moves with remarkable calm: “a faithful student of safety instructions, [she] removed her high-heeled shoes and took the pins out of her hair. So again he marvelled at the deft dynamism of women in crises” (89).

Deft dynamism: it is competence, then, that links the two women in Harold's mind; but his mother's “sure-handed” aptitude is in her furious aim, while his wife's manifests itself as a kind of ritualized, good-in-emergencies tranquility. I wonder what really does connect these behaviors except the gender of the actors, and Harold's self-distancing from them (he leaves his wife shortly thereafter; his mother, again, is “off in a corner of his mind”). And what does this say about Harold's understanding of women, especially in light of the tiresome Priscilla, the only other full-grown woman in the story?

By the end of the story, Priscilla, the self-advocate, seems terribly prissy (and thus Dickensianly named). Her vulnerability once seemed infantile to the narrator—perhaps like Harold’s in his childhood—but now it’s calcified into shrill humorlessness, and Priscilla has become someone who can’t even take a hash brownie as a joke: “Oh, that’s disgusting! I don’t think it’s funny, I don’t think *any* of you are funny” (93). When she hangs up on Harold, Updike spells out the significance for us: “The click sounded like a slap, the same echoing slap that had once exploded next to his ear. Except that his father had become his son, and his mother was his girl friend” (93). So the women throughout “Trust Me” work in concert, at least through “the acoustics of memory.” And though gender is not the focus of this essay, the way “Trust Me” presents women further destabilizes my reading of the story. I didn’t buy the *unaccountably*, and now I don’t buy the broads, because I don’t think Updike’s narrative evidence (one slap in a case of extreme maternal fear; a calm response to an airborne emergency; an offstage divorce; a girlfriend’s strident self-defense) supports his narrator’s conclusion (women seem similar: efficient, angry, misunderstanding, hysterical or childish—worst of all, humorless).

This returns me to the question of whether I trust Updike’s telling of this story. I find his narrator’s conclusions and proclamations interesting, but myopic. I disagree, ultimately, with the idea that indifference promotes humor and freedom. Humor, after all, requires engagement, the ignition of human connection. And the freedoms supplied by indifference are limited, solipsistic. As icing on the cake, the narrator’s gen(d)eralizing characterizations of women—a significant portion of the narrative evidence—ring hollow.

Do the narrator’s conclusions and proclamations belong to Updike? No, not necessarily; and, by fiction’s rules, not only *no* but *of course not*. However, just as first-person narratives run the risk of seeming autobiographical, so third-person narratives, when they philosophize with as much omniscience as “Trust Me” does, risk making the narrator’s ideas seem like the author’s. And this, in turn, harkens back to my first question about *accounts*, and a writer’s accountability to them. I’m still not sure of the answers here: Does Updike make his narrator deny narrative responsibility in order to call attention to narrative dysfunction? Is this carefully crafted to establish the story’s irony? To establish my doubt? Or does my doubt exist because Updike has misstepped?

I have to admit that I do suspect “Trust Me” of some failure of nuance. The narrator’s conclusion—“This much remained true: it had not been [Harold’s] fault, and in surviving he was somehow blamed” (93)—forgets that: 1) we have

no evidence that Harold's mother blamed him (the word "remained" indicates that this is a chronic burden); 2) Harold, as a grown man who willingly bolted a hash brownie, should accept at least a little fault for the adventure that befell him (which, after all, was not very serious, and certainly made for some narrative fun); 3) Harold's son is only seventeen, and was honest about the contents of the brownie; therefore he did not particularly victimize Harold; and 4) if I'm right that Harold, as a middle-aged adult, should accept some responsibility for eating his teenaged son's hash brownie, then Priscilla's blame of Harold is not so much a miscarriage of justice as an annoyance, and perhaps a sign of their incompatibility.

The misapprehension of scale here—comparing life-threatening childhood trauma to frivolous adult dalliance—weakens the story's conclusion for me. Again, I realize that Updike is not our narrator; he is, however, the architect of the story, and master of its structure. As the penultimate observation of "Trust Me," the pronouncement "This much remained true: it had not been his fault, and in surviving he was somehow blamed," leaves me with great doubt. With its drum-roll colon, that first clause bodes profundity, but it doesn't deliver, because an imbalance between the weight of Harold's past and present hobble its significance. If Updike really finds these anecdotes comparable, he's—well, to put it nicely, he's reaching. Or maybe just being funny: ironic, drily lighthearted, like Harold's father? Making fun of Harold's melodrama? But the tone seems wrong, then.

Perhaps, however, at the story's conclusion, I am feeling precisely the doubt Updike wants me to have. Perhaps it is even a doubt he helped stoke in me. After all, many of Harold's memories, especially of his mother, *are* presented as impressions. The word "seemed" sprouts up throughout the story's beginning, alongside that lovely phrase that holds the noise of Harold's mother's slap: "the acoustics of memory." Perhaps, just as humor minimizes risk and brings color to Harold's world, a sense of impression, of misapprehension, of *mis*-accounting, can create in the reader a useful sense of doubt. Perhaps the reader's doubt can glance, in turn, beyond the possibility of mere account, beyond the story's "exposure."

And that, if anything, is a trustworthy narrative endeavor.