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John Updike, Where Art thou?

I started reading John Updike's stories later in life, long after I'd started writing fiction. He writes about suburbia with a sharp eye for detail and he tells his multi-layered stories simply. I love his contemporary characters, most of whom I swear I know. I study his style the way an art student copies the old masters, hoping some of it will rub off on me, and when I moved to Beverly four years ago, I was delighted to learn that we share a zip code. Since then I've had a fantasy that I'd bump into him. According to my writer's group, he's been spotted at the Library and the Cabot Theatre, so I've imagined what I might say if the occasion presented itself.

"Hello, I'm Chava and I will be your indentured servant if you'd critique my writing," sounded a little bold, but you get the gist.

It hasn't happened but part of the problem might be that I've only seen photos of him from thirty or forty years ago, so how would I recognize him? I keep an eye out though, and today at the library I spotted a candidate; an older man, settled in a chair reading a magazine with an undeniable resemblance to those photos. He had Updike's strong nose, a full head of white hair, heavy glasses. I tried to imagine those old pictures on his book jackets and fast-forwarded thirty years. Could this be him? As I walked by, our eyes met and he looked at me so sharply that I thought he was extracting telepathically the fact that I have two and a half novels (unpublished) under my belt that are just begging for his critique. His were writer's eyes; observant and sharp and they were boring into me. I gave him my best smile.

But what if it wasn't him? I could be mistaken. I mulled it over as I checked out my selections and inquired about this man with the girl behind the counter, but she was too young to know what Updike looked like. I was tempted to retrieve one of his books from the stacks and show her a photo. "Why don't you just ask him?" she said.

"I'd be too embarrassed," My fantasies and nerve were abandoning me. "You're on your own here. See ya later, chump."

"Go on. What do you have to lose?" she prodded.

She was right. It wouldn't be the first time I'd made a total fool out of myself. What did I have to lose? I marched over to where he sat in the chair by the window, still engrossed in the magazine. He looked up and he appeared startled by my intrusion but there was a hint of something else; annoyance. I had invaded his privacy, and it was too late to stop.

"Excuse me, but are you John Updike?" I whispered, trying not to make a spectacle of myself in front of all the people in the room.

"What? I can't hear you! Speak up!!"

My face felt hot. I cringed as I leaned in close to his ear and whispered louder. I felt about ten pair of eyes on my back.

"What??" He yelled.

I straightened up and fled from the room, not looking back to see who might be observing, although if there was a hole in the floor, I would have preferred to drop into it. I could still hear him calling, “What did you say?” as ran out the door, in my very own version of *Rabbit Run*. Another fantasy gone. I may never know if that was him, but why I didn’t share a bit of writing with his man and just jot down my question, I will never know.