CHAPTER IV

THE MUSIC SCHOOL
Updike's third collection of short stories, *The Music School*, represents a continuation of his characteristic artistry but also a radical departure in theme and mood from his previous fiction. Published in 1966 and containing twenty stories originally written for *The New Yorker* between 1962 and 1966, *The Music School* projects a brittleness and a neurotic insight into adult problems that the earlier collections only suggested.

The title story of the collection, "The Music School," is about the inevitable sorrows and losses of daily life. Experiencing these sorrows and losses, the hero sees and hears "hints of another world, a world where angels fumble, pause and begin again." As Robert Detweiler observes, "Updike's people are not angels, and the ideal that the concept of angels elicits is lost in the pedestrian detail of pragmatic striving and petty strife. Thus the 'music school,' where the young innocents play groping tunes on instruments they cannot handle, is not an image of divine harmony but a pathos-ridden paradigm of the exercises their elders practice in learning life's notes."¹

The music school is life. The thirtyish father, suspended in adultery and possible divorce, actually does participate through his
daughter in her initiation into the musical mysteries; but the experience does not guide him toward any knowledge of universal design or metaphysical verities — only back in upon himself: “Vision, timidly, becomes percussion, percussion becomes music, music becomes emotion, emotion becomes — vision. Few of us have the heart to follow this circle to its end.” The story itself progresses according to this pattern. In the first section, the protagonist describes a change in the Communion ritual as he had heard it described by a young priest the night before; that is the “Vision.” In the second section, he refers to a startling newspaper item: a casual acquaintance of his, a computer expert, has been mysteriously shot and killed; this is the “percussion” of life. In the third section, “percussion becomes music”: he depicts the basement of the Baptist Church where his daughter and the other children practise their faltering lessons on the various instruments. That music leads to “emotion” in the fourth section, where the narrator relates the substance of the novel he never wrote about a computer programmer who dies, romantically, from the strain of an adulterous affair. This unlucky bloom of the narrator’s imagination deeply affects him, and it prompts the renewed vision of the fifth section, one in which the themes of Eucharist, music, adultery, and suffering coalesce to form an original metaphor of the world as Host. Like the tough wafer of the revised Communion sacrament,
the world "must be chewed" to insure one's active involvement; it
dare no longer simply melt in the mouth as one passively absorbs it.

"The Music School" has no plot, no narrative continuity; it
borrows the format of the informal essay but is fiction.

The place of death is the theme of "The Dark." The story
opens with these words: "The dark, he discovered, was mottled"
(203). These words recall the young David Kern's thoughts in
"Pigeon Feathers" of "His own dying, in a specific bed in a specific
room, specific walls mottled with wallpaper" (91). The unnamed
"he" of "The Dark" is also in a specific bed in a specific room, and he
knows he is to die within a few months. But the mottling has been
taken off the wallpaper and now is attributed to the dark within the
room. The meeting of radiance and darkness dominates the imagery
of this story.

In "The Dark" there is another echo of the thoughts of David
Kern, but of the adult David, not of the child. In "The Traded Car,"
David finds his horror of death rising during a spell of insomnia. He
tries futilely to soothe himself "with the caress of headlights as they
evolved from bright slits on the wall into parabolically accelerating
fans on the ceiling that then vanished: this phenomenon, with its
intimations of a life beyond me, had," he says, "comforted wakeful
nights in my earliest childhood" (PF 176-177). "The Dark" is a
detailed record of what David Kern describes as “the wrinkled, azoic territory of insomnia,” and the man in the bed, lying like David beside his sleeping wife, finds a similar comfort in watching for the shifting intrusions of light made by passing automobile headlights. He regards these as “his only companions, guards, and redeemers” (204), each “an angel of light stolen from another world” (205).

As the hours pass and the cars cease to come by, the sleepless man comforts himself in the darkness by imaging himself upheld by “a giant hand” which he supposes to be “an echo from Sunday School, some old-fashioned print” (208). He is troubled by fearful, unwanted images such as being given spiders to eat, but the thought of being held up “at some height” yet without any fear of falling is one that banishes these terrors. When it becomes at last too hard for him to continue imagining the hand, the morning light begins to return, outlining objects in the room. Then all fear passes away in the knowledge that “in a finite time, he would trickle through the fingers of the hand” and “slip blissfully into oblivion” (210).

The story “Leaves” contains the remark that Nature is that which exists without guilt (52). When Nature is covered by the purity of snow, we glimpse what human existence could be without the presence of human guilt. In “Leaves” Updike describes the
"casual precision" and the "effortless abundance" that is the hallmark of Nature (82).

"Giving Blood" opens with the following words: "The Maples had been married now nine years, which is almost too long" (18). The story tells of the disastrous consequences in the Maple household of a failure to preserve a just balance. Through Richard's inability to rule wisely, the kingdom of his marriage has fallen into disorder. And the roots of this disorder lie in the imbalance within Richard's own soul. The Maples – Richard and Joan – have left New York City and live in New England, thirty miles away from Boston. They have four children: Judith, Richard, Jr., John, and Bean. The story tells how Richard drives unwillingly into Boston on a Saturday morning, so that he and Joan can donate blood to a "sort of cousin" who is lying dangerously ill in a large Boston hospital. Richard is angry with Joan, mainly because he feels guilty about flirting with a neighbour, Marlene Brossman, at a dance the night before. Moreover, she has previously avoided giving blood, and is frightened at the prospect. But while they are in the hospital, lying on separate beds but giving blood simultaneously, his love for Joan is renewed.

The theme of kingship is introduced when the Maples enter the hospital room. Richard remembers how he once had worked
with teletype machines in a room much this size. At this hour in the morning, the work of pasting the tapes together would have been done: "It came back to him, how pleasant and secure those hours had been when, king of his own corner, he was young and newly responsible" (25). The memory returns because in this room the tapes of the scattered items of his life with Joan can be spliced into a meaningful record; and once again he can be a king renewing his youth in taking up the responsibilities he has lately ignored.

In this Boston hospital there is also to be the king of Arabia, who has come, attended by his four wives, to be treated for glaucoma. Richard too is a sick king, with eye trouble. But he sees himself not as a king, but as a slave to a demanding and ungrateful family making unreasonable demands upon his time and energy, draining him even of his life's blood and putting him (as he says accusingly to Joan) upon the rack. The act of giving blood, reluctantly entered into, changes his mood. He tells Joan he loves her, he praises her for her courage, and he feels assured of his manhood when she tells him he was brave. Irritability returns, all the same, as they stop for coffee and pancakes before driving home and he discovers he has not enough money to pay. All his resentment against the demands made upon him by his family boils over when he finds that he has only one worn dollar in his wallet. Joan ends the story with the response, "we'll both pay."
In “Twin Beds in Rome,” the marriage of Joan and Richard has come almost to a breakdown through the acute stage of tension at which they have arrived. Their conversation has become an intolerable strain of opposed wills, and only physical love-making keeps them together: “... when their tongues at last fell silent, their bodies collapsed together as two mute armies might gratefully mingle, released from the absurd hostilities decreed by two mad kings” (76).

Thus the kingdom of their marriage has fallen from disorder to suicidal civil war. There cannot be two kings in one kingdom; nor can a state survive when the king regards only private ends and forsakes the common good. By way of a kill-or-cure treatment, Richard and Joan leave home and go off by themselves on a holiday to Rome.

Although they make no plans, they find that on their arrival they are treated like royalty. Even the hotel they are taken to, though described as second-class, is tiled with rose marble and draped in imperial purple. There is only one thing that bothers Richard: their room is furnished with twin beds.

Richard is objects to the arrangement. Yet he sleeps soundly. When Joan puts out her arm to keep him from feeling lonely, he shouts out in his sleep that he wants to be left alone. However,
when they first go out sightseeing, he develops unaccustomed pains in his feet. Then, after easing his feet by buying new shoes, he gets a severe stomach ache. An hour's rest banishes the trouble (which he recognizes as nervousness), and they explore Rome together. From then on, it is taken for granted between them that they have at last been parted. They change in their behavior, becoming "with each other, as in the days of courtship, courteous, gay, and quiet" (86). But now Richard, seeing Joan happy within herself, becomes jealously reluctant to leave her. With this indication that the visit to Rome has not proved a clear-cut kill or cure, "Twin Beds in Rome" closes.

In "The Rescue" Updike focuses on the disintegration of confidence in one's mate and the struggle to regain it through and in spite of the curse of self-consciousness. Caroline Harris, a New England housewife, is with her son and husband at New Hampshire ski resort. They are accompanied by Alice Smith, their divorcee neighbour, who, Caroline suspects, is sleeping with her husband. Riding up the ski lift with Alice, with the two males in the jolting chairs ahead of them, Caroline suffers the secret anger and jealousy of her unspoken accusation. She probes, therefore, for nuances of behaviour that will betray Alice but finds nothing to confirm or assuage her fears. When the two Harris males ski away without waiting for the women, Caroline and Alice continue together down
the "Greased Lighting" slope that frightens Caroline, a novice skier. Midway down the hill, they come upon an accident: an older woman has hurt her leg in a fall and lies in the snow with her daughter kneeling at her side. Alice and Caroline remain with the woman while the daughter goes for help. In that span of time, while they are waiting for the rescue, Caroline watches her neighbour's fussy behaviour during this mild emergency and decides that her husband could not, after all, "love anyone so finicking." When the rescue party arrives, she skies off smoothly, better than ever before, to her exonerated mate.

In reality, Caroline has solved nothing; she has not proved or disapproved the existence of an affair. But she has convinced herself of her husband's innocence, at least for the time being; and her conviction is more important, for the time being, than the factual truth. It is more important, in Updike's context of fragile and broken marriages, because it takes a gesture of trust to create a truthful situation. One trusts, in other words, not because the partner is necessarily trustworthy but because such an attitude is the only one that allows for a sane and reasonably civilized relationship.

But even the impulse to trust cannot be generated in the extremely self-conscious atmosphere of modern marriage, and it is
appropriate that Caroline Harris overcomes her suspicions and regains trust through a situation that demands forgetfulness of self. In the unself-consciousness that a moment of kindness and concern brings, she gains an assurance, illusory though it may be, that will help her encounter her husband and marriage – at least to a degree – naturally again. She is one who, faltering toward divorce (skiing dangerously down the treacherous slope), finds the proper balance at the last moment. That she glides confidently and eagerly toward her husband, her skis feeling right for the first time, implies that she has also discovered a style of life before it is too late.

REFERENCES:

1. Robert Detweiler, John Updike. 94.