**Commercial**

**John Updike**

It comes on every night, somewhere in the eleven o’clock news. A CHILD runs down a STAIRCASE. A rotund ELDERLY WOMAN stands at the foot, picks up the CHILD, gives him a shake (friendly), and sets him down. There is MUSIC, containing the words “laughing child,” “fur-lined rug,” etc. The STAIRCASE looks unexpectedly authentic, oaken and knobby and steep in the style of houses where we have childhoods. We know this STAIRCASE. Some treads creak, and at the top there is a branching manycornered darkness wherein we are supposed to locate security and sleep.

The wallpaper (baskets of flowers, at a guess, alternating with ivied medallions) would feel warm, if touched. The CHILD darts off-screen. We have had time to register that it is a BOY, with long hair cut straight across his forehead. The camera stays with the ELDERLY WOMAN, whom by now we identify as the GRANDMOTHER. She gazes after the (supposedly) receding BOY so fondly we can imagine “(gazes fondly)” in the commercial’s script. The second drags; her beaming threatens to become blank.

But now, with an electrifying touch of uncertainty, so that we do not know if it was the director’s idea or the actress’s, GRANDMOTHER slowly wags her head, as if to say, My, oh my, what an incorrigible little rascal, what a lovable little man-child! Her heart, we feel, so brims with love that her plump body, if a whit less healthy and compact, if a whit less compressed and contained by the demands and accoutrements of GRANDMOTHERLINESS, would burst. GRANDMOTHERLINESS massages her from all sides, like the brushes of a car wash. And now (there is so much to see!) she relaxes her arms in front of her, the fingers of one hand gently gripping the wrist of the other. This gesture tells us that her ethnic type is Anglo-Saxon. An Italian mama, say, would have folded her arms across her bosom; and, also, wouldn’t the coquetry of Mediterranean women forbid their wearing an apron out of the kitchen, beside what is clearly a front STAIRCASE?

So, while still suspended high on currents of anticipation, we deduce that this is not a commercial for spaghetti. Nor for rejuvenating skin creams or hair rinses, for the camera cuts from GRANDMOTHER to the BOY. He is hopping through a room. Not quite hopping, nor exactly skipping: a curious fey gait that bounces his cap of hair and evokes the tender dialectic of the child–director encounter. This CHILD, who, though a child actor acting the part of a child, is nevertheless also truly a child, has been told to move across the fictional room in a childish way. He has obeyed, moving hobbled by self-consciousness yet with the elastic bounce that Nature has bestowed upon him and that no amount of adult direction can utterly squelch. Only time can squelch it. We do not know how many “takes” were sifted through to get this second of movement. Though no child in reality (though billions of children have crossed millions of rooms) ever moved across a room in quite this way, an impression of CHILDHOOD pierces us. We get the message: GRANDMOTHER’S HOUSE (and the montage is so swift we cannot itemize the furniture, only concede that it appears fittingly fusty and congested) is cozy, safe—a place to be joyful in. Why? The question hangs.

We are in another room. A kitchen. A shining POT dominates the foreground. The BOY, out of focus, still bobbing in that unnatural, affecting way, enters at the background, comes forward into focus, becomes an alarmingly large face and a hand that lifts the lid of the pot. STEAM billows. The BOY blows the STEAM away, then stares at us with stagily popped eyes. Meaning? He has burned himself? There is a bad smell? The director, off-screen, has shouted at him? We do not know, and we are made additionally uncomfortable by the possibility that this is a spaghetti commercial after all.

Brief scene: GRANDMOTHER washing BOY’S face. Bathroom fixtures behind. Theme of heat (COZY HOUSE, hot POT) subliminally emerges. Also: suppertime? We do not witness supper. We are back at the STAIRCASE. New actors have arrived: a tall and vigorous YOUNG COUPLE, in stylish overcoats. Who? We scarcely have time to ask. The BOY leaps (flies, indeed; we do not see his feet launch him) upward into the arms of the MAN. These are his PARENTS. We ourselves, watching, welcome them; the depth of our welcome reveals to us a dread within ourselves, of something morbid and claustral in the old HOUSE, with its cunningly underlined snugness and its lonely household of benevolent crone and pampered, stagy brat. These other two radiate the brisk air of outdoors. To judge from their clothes, it is cold outside; this impression is not insignificant; our sense of subliminal coherence swells.

We join in the BUSTLE OF WELCOME, rejoicing with the YOUNG COUPLE in their sexual energy and safe return and great good fortune to be American and modern and solvent and fertile and to have such a picture-book GRANDMOTHER to babysit for them whenever they partake of some innocent infrequent SPREE. But whose mother is GRANDMOTHER, the FATHER’S or the MOTHER’S? All questions are answered. The actor playing the YOUNG FATHER ignores GRANDMOTHER with the insouciance of blood kinship, while the actress playing the YOUNG MOTHER hugs her, pulls back, reconsiders, then dips forward to bestow upon the beaming plump cheek a kiss GRANDMOTHER does not, evidently, expect. Her beaming wavers momentarily, like a candle flame when a distant door is opened. The DAUGHTER-IN-LAW again pulls back, as if coolly to contemplate the product of her affectionate inspiration. Whether her tense string of hesitations was spun artfully by an actress fulfilling a role or was visited upon the actress as she searched her role for nuances (we can imagine how vague the script might be: Parents return. Greetings all around. Camera medium tight), a ticklish closeness of manoeuvre, amid towering outcroppings of good will, has been conveyed.

The FAMILY is complete. And now the underlying marvel is made manifest. The true HERO of these thirty seconds unmasks. The FAMILY fades into a blue cartoon flame, and the MUSIC, no longer buried by visual stimuli, sings with clarion brilliance, “NATURAL GAS is a Beauti-ful Thing!”