



S M I T T E N

There is really not all that much difference between an obscure volunteer columnist for a humble weekly newspaper and a revered, legendary, universally acclaimed, award-inundated, magically versatile genius of an author.

Except for the tiniest twist of fate here and there along the way, I think I could have been John Updike.

Of course I revered him. My entire adult life, I've made my living as a writer. So did he. (No, he didn't excel in writing junk mail the way I have, but he was pretty successful in his own way. Couple of Pulitzer Prizes, for example. Couple of O. Henrys. The National Medal of Arts, conferred by Congress. This sort of thing.)

And it's not widely known that Updike originally wanted to be a cartoonist. I want to be a cartoonist too! My inferior sketches all through this book attest to the fact that I have not become one. Just like Updike!

Furthermore, John Updike began his professional career writing for the *New Yorker*. By a remarkable coincidence, I began my professional career being rejected by the *New Yorker*.

Then — spookier parallels yet. John Updike famously left the magazine after only two years; I left the Arizona desert after only two decades. Updike decided to move to the very fine historic town of Ipswich, Massachusetts. I did too.

One bitter winter day, I found an antique house — hey! Updike lived in an antique house too! I would follow in The Great Man's footsteps. Almost literally. He had long since moved to a mansion down in Beverly Farms; but hey, maybe I would bump into him at Costco!

Fate spared him the embarrassment of my obsession.

He was aging, he was ill; and perhaps the universe warned him I was coming. Ten days after I signed the papers to buy my house in Ipswich, Mr. Updike slipped into eternity. He managed to dodge the fixated wannabe by a scant 250 hours. I mourned. For the world, and for myself.

Now, here, today, I confess. I want to be John Updike. But — there are limits. Some suggest that he wrote about his Ipswich neighbors, changing names to protect the guilty. I would never stoop so high. As "The Outsidah," writing a column for the *Ipswich Chronicle*, I write about my neighbors without offering any protection whatsoever. So far, only a few people seem to despise me for it. And I have received only one direct threat. It involved a noisy rooster, which I've been warned not to write about. So I'd rather not say anything more about this. Please don't ask me about the rooster.

It is a great honor to write "The Outsidah," commenting on life in my much beloved adopted hometown from the perspective of a newcomer. Nah, *honor* is too soft a word. Updike would never settle for such a word, at least not without a page-long paragraph to go with it. But at the *Chronicle*, my esteemed editor has gently conditioned me to limit my columns to about 600 words. As I'm approaching this boundary at the moment, I'll just say it's a great honor to write "The Outsidah," and leave it at this.

I am Ipswich-besotted, and unashamed. I have made a firm commitment never to leave for a mansion in Beverly Farms. Don't try to tempt me with a Pulitzer.

Spirit of John Updike, please forgive me. For everything.

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