# The Crow in the Woods

# John Updike

ALL THE WARM NIGHT the secret snow fell so adhesively that every twig in the woods about their little rented house supported a tall slice of white, an upward projection which in the shadowless glow of early morning lifted depth from the scene, made it seem Chinese, calligraphic, a stiff tapestry hung from the gray sky, a shield of lace interwoven with black thread. Jack wondered if he had ever seen anything so beautiful before. The snow had stopped. As if it had been a function of his sleep.

He was standing in his bathrobe by the window at dawn because last evening, amid an intricate and antique luxury, he and his wife had dined with their landlords. Two wines, red and darker red, had come with the dinner. Candles shuddered on the long table. Two other couples—older, subtly ravaged—expertly made small talk. Dinner over, the men and women separated and then, the men’s throats rasped by brandy and cigars, rejoined in a large room whose walls were, astoundingly, green silk. The mixed sexes chattered immersed in an incoherent brilliance like chandelier facets clashing. And at the end (the clock on the gray marble mantel stating the precipitate hour with golden hands whose threadlike fineness itself seemed a kind of pointed tact), all swooped, in a final and desperate-feeling flight, up the curving stairs and into the chamber where in daytime hours the white-haired hostess conducted her marvellous hobby of *cartonnage*. She had fashioned a pagoda of cut colored papers. On the walls there were paper bouquets of flowers, framed. On the worktable stood the most immense, the most triumphantly glossy and nozzled bottle of Elmer’s Glue that Jack had ever seen; he had never dreamed such a size could exist. The blue bull impressed on the bottle jubilantly laughed. Servants came and wrapped their coats around them. On the front porch the departing guests discovered at midnight a world thinly disguised in snow. The universal descent of snow restricted the area of their vision; outdoors had a domed intimacy. The guests carolled praise. The host, a short and old man, arthritic, preened: his dinner, his wine, his wife’s *cartonnage*, and now his snow. Looped, the young couple returned to the little rented house that even was his. They satisfied the sitter, dismissed her into the storm like a disgrace, and, late as it was, made love. So, in a reflex of gratitude, when six hours later their child cried, the man arose instead of his wife, and administered comfort.

The soaked diaper released an invisible cloud of ammonia that washed tears into his eyes. The whiteness edging the windows made decisive and cutting the light of the sun, burning behind the sky like a bulb in a paper lampshade. The child’s room had become incandescent; the wallpaper, flowered with pale violets, glowed evenly, so that even the fluff-cluttered corners brimmed with purity.

The wordless girl, stripped and puzzled, studied the unusual figure of her father, out of season at this hour. The purple bathrobe’s wool embrace and the cold pressure of the floor on his feet alike felt flattering, magnifying him. His naked giant’s thighs kept thrusting between the leaves of the bathrobe into the white air. He saw them, saw everything, through three polished sheets of glass: the memory of his drunkenness, his present insufficiency of sleep, and the infiltrating brilliance of the circumambient snow. As his impressions were sharp, so he was soft. The parallel floor-cracks, the paint’s salmon sheen, his daughter’s somber and intent gaze like the gaze of a chemically distended pupil—these things, received through an instrument which fatigue had wiped clean of distractions, bit deeply into him and pressed, with an urgency not disagreeable, on his bowels.

Though the house was small, it had two bathrooms. He used the one attached to his daughter’s room, where the square shower-curtain rod wobbled and tipped from the repeated weight of wet diapers. Around its bolted root the ceiling plaster had turned crumby. He stood for some seconds looking down at the oval of still water in which floated his several feces like short rotten sticks, strangely burnished.

The toilet flushed; the whole illuminated interior of the little house seemed purged into action. He dressed his daughter’s tumblesome body deftly and carried her to the stairs. The top landing gave on the door to his bedroom; he looked in and saw that his wife had changed position in the broadened bed. Her naked arms were flung out of the covers and rested, crook’d, each to a pillow. One breast, lifted by the twist of her shoulders and shallow in her sleep, was with its budded center exposed. The sun, probing the shredding sky, sent low through the woods and windowpanes a diluted filigree, finer than color, that spread across her and up the swarthy oak headboard a rhomboidal web. Like moths alighting on gauze, her blue eyes opened.

Discovered, he hid downstairs. The child absent-mindedly patted the back of his neck as they descended the tricky narrow steps. These weak touches made his interior tremble as if with tentative sunshine. Downstairs was darker. The reflection of the snow was absorbed by the dank and porous rented furniture. Good morning, Mr. Thermostat. The milkman would be late today, chains slogging a tune on his stout tires: glory be. The childbearing arm of him ached.

He was unable to find the box of child’s cereal. The cupboards held confectioners’ sugar and plastic spoon sets sprawling in polychrome fans. The catch of the tray of the high chair snagged; the girl’s legs were hinged the wrong way. With multiplying motions of uncertainty he set water to heating in a cold-handled pan. Winter. Warm cereal. Where? The ceiling rumbled; the plumbing sang.

Down came the wife and mother, came, wrapped in a blue cocoon that made her body shapeless, her face by the contrast white. She complained she had not been able to go back to sleep after he had left the bed. He knew this to be a lie, but unintentional. He had witnessed her unwitting sleep.

Proud, relieved, he sat at the small pine table burnished with linseed oil. Gerber’s wheat-dust came to smoke in the child’s tray. Orange juice, bright as a crayon, was conjured before him. Like her sister the earth, the woman puts forth easy flowers, fresh fruits. As he lifted the glass to his lips he smelled her on his fingertips.

And now, released to return to his companion through the window, he again stared. The woods at their distance across the frosted lawn were a Chinese screen in which an immense alphabet of twigs lay hushed: a black robe crusted with white braid standing of its own stiffness. Nothing in it stirred. There was no depth, the sky a pearl slab, the woods a fabric of vision in which vases, arches, and fountains were hushed.

His wife set before him a boiled egg smashed and running on a piece of toast on a pink plate chipped and gleaming on the oblique placemat of sunlight flecked with the windowpane’s imperfections.

Something happened. Outdoors a huge black bird came flapping with a crow’s laborious wingbeat. It banked and, tilted to fit its feet, fell toward the woods. His heart halted in alarm for the crow, with such recklessness assaulting an inviolable surface, seeking so blindly a niche for its strenuous bulk where there was no depth. It could not enter. Its black shape shattering like an instant of flak, the crow plopped into a high branch and sent snow showering from a sector of lace. Its wings spread and settled. The vision destroyed, his heart overflowed. “Claire!” Jack cried.

The woman’s pragmatic blue eyes flicked from his face to the window, where she saw only snow, and rested on the forgotten food steaming between his hands. Her lips moved:

“Eat your egg.”