# A Sandstone Farmhouse

# John Updike

Joey’s first glimpse of the house was cloudy in his memory, like an old photo mottled by mildew. During World War Two, his family owned no car, and renting one, for their infrequent excursions out of the compact brick city where his father worked, so embarrassed the twelve-year-old boy that he didn’t see clearly through the windows, and wasn’t conscious of much beyond his internal struggle not to be car-sick. He fought the swaying, jiggling motion, which was mixed with the warm confluent smells of rubber floormat and petroleum combustion and the patient pale veiny look of his father’s hand on the gearshift knob. Farm country, miles of it, poured past. Depressing, monotonous fields moved up and down beneath their hazy burden of crops. A winding asphalt highway climbed a hill, passed a lumpy stone church, then settled into a flat stretch where they slowed to turn left down a dirt washboard road that shook the car sickeningly. Not a building in sight. No sign of civilization but telephone poles carrying a single wire. Another turn, right this time, down an even smaller dirt road, and they stopped, and in the sudden flood of fresh air as Joey opened the car door the green of the grass rose waxy and bright to greet his giddiness, his nausea. In his cloudy memory, they went up to the house and there were people in it, farm people, wearing workclothes and muddy shoes, shyly trying to get out of their way, like animals. There was a front porch, he remembered that much. With a bannister upheld by boards jigsawed into an ornamental shape, and a secret space underneath, of weeds and pebbly dirt. A space where chickens could scratch, and dogs could lie and pant during hot weather, the kind of space that is friendly and inviting to a boy of the age he was just outgrowing.

By the time they had bought the house with its surrounding eighty acres and moved in, he was thirteen, and the front porch had vanished, leaving a space between the front of the house and the cement walk where they eventually planted croci and tulips and erected a grape arbor. Joey as an adult could not remember how or when it had happened, their tearing down the rotten old porch. Pieces of it remained in the barn—segments of bannister, and ornamental balusters cut of inch-thick pine. Once he even took a baluster home with him, back to New York City, as some kind of memento, or sample of folk art. The pattern held a circle in the center, a circle with a hole, between two shapes jigsawed into the wood, one like an arrow and one like a fish. Different-colored flakes fell dryly from it, brittle layers of old-time lead paint. The object, not quite of art, rested sideways on the black-marble mantel of his apartment for a while, then found its way to the back of a closet, with broken squash rackets and college textbooks and table lamps that might some day be made to glow again. Like his mother, he had trouble throwing anything away.

If he and his father and grandfather had torn the porch down themselves, he would have remembered so heroic a labor, as he did the smashing of the lath-and-plaster partition that separated the two small parlors downstairs, making one big living room, or the tearing out of the big stone kitchen fireplace and its chimney, right up into the attic. He remembered swinging the great stones out the attic window, he and his grandfather pushing, trying not to pinch their fingers, while his father, his face white with the effort, held the rope of a makeshift pulley rigged over a rafter. Once clear of the sill, the heavy stones fell with a strange slowness, seen from above, and accumulated into a kind of mountain it became Joey’s summer job to clear away. He learned a valuable lesson that first summer on the farm, while he turned fourteen: even if you manage to wrestle only one stone into the wheelbarrow and sweatily, staggeringly trundle it down to the swampy area this side of the springhouse, eventually the entire mountain will be taken away. On the same principle, an invisible giant, removing only one day at a time, will eventually dispose of an entire life.

When, over forty years after that summer of 1946, his mother died, and the at last uninhabited house yielded up its long-buried treasures, he came upon a photograph of her at the age of ten, posing in front of the porch. Someone in pencil, in a flowing handwriting not his mother’s—hers was tiny, and cramped, and backslanted—had marked on the back, *Taken August 1914. Enlarged August 1917*. Someone had loved this snapshot enough to have it enlarged and mounted on thick gray cardboard: who?

His mother, wearing a low-waisted dress, dark stockings, and black shoes with big, thick heels, her hair done up in a long braid that hangs over one shoulder, is holding the collar of a young medium-sized dog, part collie. Both the child and the dog are looking straight into the camera with similar half-smiles and wide-spaced, trusting eyes. They are standing on a cement walk that is still there, uncracked; behind them the porch balusters repeat their simple, artful pattern and a small rose bush blooms. The long-dead dog and the recently dead human female look identically happy. Joey would hardly have recognized his mother but for the thick abundance of her hair—a cheerful chestless little girl in old woman’s shoes. Beyond the edge of the barn to her right, ghostly in the enlargement, are fences and trees of which no trace remains and, just barely visible, an entire building that has vanished—a tobacco shed, perhaps. The lawn is edged around the walk, and the fences look trim. This was the private paradise, then, to which she attempted to return, buying back the old sandstone farmhouse that her parents, feeling full enough of tobacco profits to retire, had sold while she was innocently off at normal school. Precocious, she had been skipped up through the local schools, and was sent away at the age of twelve, and hated it, hated it all, including the hour-long trolley ride to Kutztown. The swaying, the ozone, the drunk men who sat down beside her made her sick.

She loved the old house; she loved the *idea* of it. For most of her life, except for the twenty years of exile in her young womanhood, when she went to normal school, then to college, and married a man she met there, and travelled with him until the Depression cost him his travelling job, and bore him a son, in the heart of the Depression, while they were all living with her parents in the brick city house—except for these twenty years, she happily inhabited an idea. The sandstone house had been built, her fond research discovered, in 1812. In that era teams of masons and stonelayers roamed the countryside, erecting these Pennsylvania farmhouses on principles of an elegant simplicity. Their ground-plan was square, set square to the compass. The south face basked in the maximum of sunshine; the east windows framed the sunrise, and the west the sunset. The cornerstones were cut at a slightly acute angle, to emphasize the edge. The stout scaffolding was rooted in holes in the thirty-inch walls as they rose, and these holes were plugged with stones four inches square when the masonry was pointed, and the scaffolding dismantled, from the top down. In the mortar, lime from the lime kiln was mixed with sand from creek beds, to match the stones. Though the size of the stones raised and fitted into place was prodigious, the real feats of leverage occurred in the quarrying. Sandstone exposed in an outcropping was rendered useless by weather, but underneath the earth the sound stone slept, to be painstakingly split by star drills and wedges and “feathers” of steel, and then hauled out by teams of horses, on wagons or sleds. Sometimes a wagon shattered under the load of a single great stone. But the vast hauling and lifting continued, a movement as tidal as that of the glaciers which here and there, in this area of the last ice age’s most southerly advance, had deposited huge moraines—acres frightening in their sheer stoniness; heaped-up depths of boulders in which no tree could take root, though forest surrounded them; lakes of barrenness fascinating and bewildering to nineteenth-century minds eager to perceive God’s hand everywhere.

For sensitive, asthmatic Joey, removed from a brick semi-detached city house where he had felt snug—where he could hear through his bedroom walls the neighbors stirring as he awoke, and the milk being delivered on the porch, and the trolley cars clanging at the corner a block away—the silent thickness of stones just behind the old plaster and wallpaper, and the rough hearths and fireplaces visible within the country house, seemed to harbor nature’s damp and cold. A sullen held breath dwelled in the walls. The summer’s heat brought swarms of wasps, millipedes, carpenter ants, and silverfish out from the crannies. That first winter in the house, before an oil furnace was installed in the basement, a kerosene-burning stove in the living room provided the only heat. Joey remembered the stove clearly; it was painted chocolate-brown, and stood on little bent legs on an asbestos sheet papered with imitation wood grain. He spent days huddled in blankets next to this stove, on a grease-spotted sofa that had been brought close. With his chronic cold, he missed days of school, and hated to, for it was warm at school, and there was running water, and flush toilets. And girls in long pleated skirts and fuzzy sweaters and bobby socks, who belonged to the modern era, to civilization. He clung to civilization by reading; huddled in the brown stove’s aromatic aura of coal oil, he read anything—P. G. Wodehouse, Ellery Queen, John Dickson Carr, Thorne Smith—that savored of cities and took him out of this damp, cold little stone house.

His mother remembered that first winter with rueful pleasure, as a set of tribulations blithely overcome. “It was really very hard, I suppose, on everybody—you were *so* sick, and your father had to struggle to get to work in that old Chevrolet that was all we could afford, and for my parents it was a terrible defeat, to come back to the farm after they had gotten away; they would hide together in the corner just like children—but I was so happy to be here I hardly noticed. The movers had broken the large pane of glass in the front door, and for some reason that whole first winter we never managed to replace it; we lived with a sheet of cardboard wedged over the hole. It’s incredible that we survived.” And she would laugh, remembering. “We tried to light fires in the living-room fireplace but all the wood the Schellenbargers had left us in the basement was moldy elm, and that fireplace never did draw well, even when the swifts’ nests weren’t plugging it up. Smoke leaks out into the room, I’ve never understood quite why. If you look up the flue with a flashlight, the stonework has a twist to it.”

Joey seemed to remember, though, waking upstairs and putting his feet onto the bare wood floor and grabbing his school clothes and hurrying in his pajamas down the narrow stairs—the treads worn in two troughs by generations of footsteps, the nailheads protruding and shiny and dangerous—to dress in front of the fireplace, where logs were crackling. The freezing upstairs air would lick at his skin like flame, like the endless conversations between his mother and her parents, incessant flowing exchanges that would ripple into quarrel and chuckle back again into calm while he focused, when he was home, into the pages of a book. His grandfather had a beautiful, patient, elocutionary voice; his grandmother spoke little, in guttural responses. His mother, unlike most adults, hadn’t parted from her parents, and clung to them with old tales and grievances, like someone adding up the same set of figures day after day and forever expecting a different answer. While Joey, sick, huddled by the stove, heated conversations were in his ears as the smell of coal oil was in his nostrils, but always, those five years (only five!) that he lived in the sandstone house with four adults, his attention was aimed elsewhere—on schoolwork, on the future. He tried to ignore what was around him. The house, even when plumbing and central heating and a telephone were installed, and new wallpaper made the repainted rooms pretty, embarrassed him.

He was never more embarrassed than in that summer before they moved in, before they owned even the erratic old Chevrolet. The war was still on, the Pacific part of it. Several times, his mother made him travel with her by bus out to the farm they already owned. She had a vision of a windbreak of pines rimming the big field, along the road, and she and Joey carried seedlings in boxes, and shovels, and pruners, and a watering can—all this humiliating apparatus dragged onto a city bus by a red-faced middle-aged woman and a skinny boy with ears that stuck out and dungarees that were too short. His mother wore a checked shirt like a man’s and a straw sun hat and a pair of light-blue overalls with a bib; she looked like a farmer in a Hollywood musical comedy. There was no space inside the bus for the shovels; the driver had to store them in the luggage compartment and then stop and get out in the middle of nowhere to hand the tools over. It was a relief when the bus, headed south toward Washington, D.C., disappeared around a bend in the highway.

Joey and his mother walked down the dirt washboard road in the heat, carrying their equipment. He had never been so humiliated, and vowed never to be again. He couldn’t blame his mother, he still needed her too much, so he blamed the place—its hazy, buggy fields, its clouds of blowing pollen that made him sneeze and his eyes water, its little sandstone house like a cube of brown sugar melting in the heat, in a dip of hillside beneath an overgrown, half-dead apple orchard. All through noon and into the afternoon they cleared small spaces at the edge of the field, where the Schellenbargers’ last crop of field corn was pushing up in limp green rows, and cut away burdock and poison ivy and honeysuckle, and dug holes, and set in each hole a six-inch puff of pine seedling, and sprinkled water over the sandy red earth. Moving a few paces farther on to plant the next tree, Joey could no longer see the last one amid the weeds and wild grass. The work seemed hopeless. Yet, when the afternoon breeze came up, he heard a purity of silence that didn’t exist in his beloved street of semi-detached houses. Perhaps one car an hour passed, the people staring at this woman and boy dressed in clothes suitable for neither country nor city. And he felt a kind of heroism in his periodic trudge, with the empty sprinkling can, for the half-mile along the edge of the cornfields to the empty house, with its rusty iron pump on the back porch, and then the long haul back, the sloshing can as heavy now as a stone.

He felt heroic to himself. Space for heroism existed out here; his being had been transposed to a new scale. He was determined to impress his mother—to win her back, since here on this farm he for the first time encountered something she apparently loved as much as she loved him.

At last, the weeds threw feathery long shadows upon one another and the tiny pines were all planted in the hopeless roadside jungle and it was time to walk back up the dusty washboard road to wait for the bus from Washington to round the corner. Having gone and come so far, the bus could be as much as an hour late, and their eyes would sting, staring down the gray highway for it, and his stomach would sink at the thought that they had missed it and were stranded. But not even this possibility daunted him, for he had forged a mood of defiant collusion in which he was numbed to embarrassment and played a role both stoic and comic, co-starring with his mother in her straw sun hat and their lanky, sharp-faced sidekicks, the clippers and the shovel. Years later, he could even laugh with her about it, the memory of those awkward hot trips to plant a line of trees most of which never thrived, choked by thistles and bindweed or severed in a year or two by a careless sweep of a scythe.

Yet a few of the pines, perhaps six or seven, did live to tower along the roadbank—shaggy-headed apparitions taller than a ship’s mast, swaying in the wind. By this time, the dirt road was macadamized and hummed with traffic, and the bus route to Washington had long ago been abandoned as unprofitable.

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Five years after the September when they had moved, Joey went to college. Essentially, he never returned. He married in his senior year, and after graduation moved to New York City. Another of his mother’s visions, along with that of the farm as paradise, was of him as a poet; he fulfilled this heroic task as best he could, by going to work for an ad agency and devoting himself to the search for the arresting phrase and image, on the edge of the indecent, that incites people to buy—that gives them permission, from the mythic world of fabricated symbols, to spend. The business was like poetry in that you needed only a few lucky hits, and he had his share, and couldn’t complain. He never again had to get on a bus with a shovel.

The numbers attached to the years and decades slowly changed, and with them the numbers in his bank account and on his apartment building. His first marriage took place in three different apartments, his turbulent second in four, his short-lived third in only one, and now he wondered if women had been not quite his thing all along. He had always felt most at ease, come to think of it, in the company of men, especially those who reminded him of his quiet, uncomplaining father. But it was the AIDS-conscious Eighties by then, and his hair had passed through gray into virtual white, and he was content to share his life with his books, his CDs (compact discs, certificates of deposit), and his modest little art collection, mixed of watery commercialism and icy minimalism. On the other side of the white walls of his apartment he could hear the mumble and thump of his neighbors, and he liked that. He had come home, in the Fifties, to semi-detached living.

Three hours away, his widowed mother lived alone in the sandstone house. Joey had been the first to depart. A few years later, his grandfather died, suddenly, with a stroke like a thunderclap, and then, after a bedridden year, his grandmother. This created an extra room upstairs, so Joey and his first wife and young children, when they came to visit in the Sixties, no longer had to camp out downstairs, on cots and the sofa spotted by the peanut-butter crackers he used to eat when condemned to reading the days away. The upstairs had two real bedrooms, to which the doors could be closed, and a kind of hallway beside the head of the stairs where he had slept for five years, listening to the four adults rustle and snore and creak while girls and prayers and the beginnings of poems all ran together in his brain. His grandfather, on his way downstairs in the early morning, would ruffle the hair on the sleeping boy’s head, and the gathering sounds of family breakfast, as Joey’s grandmother and parents followed, would rise under him with the smell of toast, a doughy warmth of life rising beneath the cold bare floorboards of soft old pine.

There was a fourth room, a small room in the northwest corner, where his mother had once been born, in a long agony of labor—a rural calvary, as Joey imagined it, with flickering lamps and steaming kettles and ministering cousins arriving by horse and buggy—that shaped her relations with her own mother into, it seemed, a ferocious apology, a futile undying adhesion in an attempt to make amends. She nursed her mother in the old woman’s long paralysis of dying, but not always patiently, or tenderly, and when the ordeal at last was over she was left with additional cause for self-blame. “I spent my whole life,” she concluded, “trying to please my mother, and never did.”

Joey would ask, irritated by these repeated surges of self-dramatization, “Did she ever say so?”

“No, but you knew her. She never said anything.”

“Unlike *my* mother,” he said, with an ironic pretense of gallantry.

She heard the irony. “Yes, I inherited Pop’s gift of gab,” she admitted. “It’s been a curse, really. If you talk enough, you don’t feel you have to *do* anything.”

This fourth room had become the bathroom, with a tub but no shower, a basin but no cabinet. Toothpaste, sun lotion, hand creams, razors, dental floss, slivers of soap thriftily stuck together all accumulated on the deep sill overlooking the blackening shingles of the back-porch roof. After his father died, in the early Seventies, the house gradually lost the power to purge itself of accumulation. The family’s occupancy, which had begun with removal of the porch, the inner wall, and the chimney stones, now silted the attic and cellar and windowsills full of souvenirs of his mother’s lengthening residence.

On the theory that it would save the wild birds from being eaten, she had fed a stray cat that came to the back porch; this cat then became several, and the several became as many as forty. The kitchen became choked with stacked cases of cat food, and a site in the woods, at the end of a path overgrown with raspberry canes, became a mountain of empty cat-food cans. Tin Mountain, Joey’s children called it. Magazines and junk mail and church pamphlets sat around on tables and chairs waiting to be bundled and taken to the barn, to wait there for the Boy Scouts’ next paper drive. Photographs of Joey and his children and wives, Christmas cards and valentines from relations and neighbors piled up on available spaces like a kind of moss. Even the table where his mother ate had room eventually for only one plate and cup and saucer, her own. The house was clogging up, Joey felt, much as her heart—coronary angiography had revealed—was plugging with arteriosclerosis, and her weakly pumped lungs were filling with water.

His arrivals, as the years went on, seemed to accumulate, one on top of another. He would park his car by the barn and pick his way across the line of stepping stones that in the decades since they were laid (even Granny, stiff and bent over, helping with the crowbar) had been silted over by the sandy soil and its crabgrass. On the back porch there would be a puddle of cats and kittens mewing to be fed. Entering the back door, he would try not to grimace at the stench of cat food and damp cardboard. His mother saved, in separate sections of the floor, the empty cans, and the plastic bags the supermarket bagged her groceries in, and slippery stacks of mail-order catalogues, and string and twine snarled in a galvanized bucket. Joey recognized in this accumulation a superstition he had to fight within himself—the belief that everything has value. The birds in the trees, the sunflower at the edge of the orchard, the clumsily pasted-up valentine received years ago from a distant grandchild—all have a worth which might, at any moment, be called into account. It was a way of advertising that one’s own life was infinitely precious.

There would be a peck of a kiss at the door, and he would carry the suitcase upstairs, past the dog; the last of the series of dogs was a whirling, nipping mongrel bitch who was thrilled to have a man in the house. The guest room had been his parents’ bedroom. When she became a widow, his mother had moved into her parents’ old room, closer to the room in which she had been born. The move was part, Joey felt, of an obscure religious system that had nothing to do with Christianity. He remembered how, in a surprising rite of that system, his parents on the day after his grandmother died took her stained, urine-soaked mattress outdoors and burned it, down near the stones he had dumped, darkening the sky all morning with the smoke.

Here, in this guest room, at night, without a wife to distract and comfort him, he would begin to fight for his breath. The bed sagged so that his back hurt. The pillow felt heavy and dense. The sandstone hearth of the never-used fireplace in the room would emit an outdoor dampness. Birds and bats and mice would stir in the porous walls, and his mother’s motions would make her bed on the other side of the thin wall creak. Was she awake, or asleep? Which was he? He could truly relax only in the dawn light, when the dog would wake her, scrabbling on the bare boards with her claws, and the two females would slowly, noisily head downstairs, and the can-opener would rhythmically begin to chew through the first installment of cat-food cans.

The guest room for some reason had no curtains; in the dead of the night the moon burned on the wide sills as if calling to him, calling him back to a phase his whole adult life had been an effort to obliterate. The asthma, the effect of inner tightening and complication, wasn’t so bad, usually, the first two nights; he might manage five or six hours of sleep each, if he then could get away, back to cozy, salubrious New York. But on long holiday weekends he would struggle through the whole third night with the accumulated house-dust and pollen in his lungs, and with the damp hard pillow, and with the obdurate moonlight, so accusatory in its white silence.

He was aware of his mother and himself, lying each in bed, as survivors of a larger party that had once occupied this house. It was as if, on a snowy pass, they had killed and eaten the others, and now one of the two remaining must perish next. She, too, in her eighties, had breathing problems, and slept with her head up on two pillows. One night she woke him, with the soft words, “Joey. I’m not doing so well. Put on your daddy’s old overcoat and come downstairs with me.”

He was awake, his head clear as moonlight, in an instant. “Shall we call the hospital?”

“No, I just need to sit up. You know which overcoat, it hangs at the foot of the stairs.”

It had hung there for years, one of those curious comforting rags his father would acquire in thrift shops or outlet stores. Joey had often seen it on him, in the last year of the old man’s life, when his legs turned white and phlebitic and his nose turned blue with poor circulation and his eyes sank deeper and deeper into his head and his deafness worsened. But to the end his father had held his head high, and took an academic interest in the world. Once a social-science teacher, he continued to read fat books of contemporary history, and wrote Joey, in one of his rare letters, in his patient, legible schoolteacher’s hand, that being deaf made it easier for him to concentrate.

Joey wondered why his mother was being so insistent about the coat, but obediently put it on. It had a fuzziness unusual in dark overcoats, and was big for him, since his father had been bigger than he. She was right; once it was on, over his pajamas, he became a child again, and calm, and trusting. They went downstairs and turned up the thermostat and sat in the dark living room together, he on the sofa and she in her television-viewing chair, and he watched her struggle for breath, in little sudden shuddering gasps like the desperate heaves of a bird caught in the chimney.

“Do you hurt?” he asked.

She had little breath for speaking, and shook her head No, and her head underwent again the convulsion, as if trying to keep above water. “It’s like,” she gasped, “a squeezing.”

“Sure you wouldn’t like to drive to the hospital?”

A vigorous headshake again. “What can they do? But torture you.”

So he sat there, in his father’s overcoat, fighting sleepiness, wondering if his mother would die before his eyes. The dog, agitated at first by this pre-dawn rising, wheezed and resettled on the floor. The moonlight weakened on the sills across the room, with their potted geraniums and violets and a night-blooming cereus that had been allowed to grow grotesquely long, so that its stem filled the window. His mother’s shudders lessened, and eventually she told him to go upstairs, she would sit here a while longer. In her old age she had become almost grafted onto this chair of hers. On a previous visit, she had shocked him by refusing, when the evening run of television comedies that she faithfully watched was over, to come upstairs at all; morning found her still sitting there, in her clothes. This irritated him, along with her television-watching. “Why do you watch all these idiots?” he once asked her. “They seem realer to you than I am.”

She did not deny it. “Well,” she had answered, “they’re always here.”

Now, her crisis past, he accepted her dismissal gratefully and yet reluctantly. He went upstairs feeling that this hour had been the most purely companionable he had ever spent with her in this house. To Joey in his father’s fuzzy, overlarge coat, as he silently watched his mother struggle and the dog stir and doze and the night-blooming cereus cast its gawky shadow in the deep window recess beyond the tasselled bridge lamp and the upright piano, it had been like one of those scenes we witness in childhood, from under the table or over the edge of the crib, understanding nothing except that large forces are in motion around us—that there is a heavy heedless dynamism from which we are, as children, momentarily sheltered.

When she had her next attack of breathlessness, he was not there, and she called the neighbors, and they called the township ambulance, which came at five in the morning. For all her talk of “torture,” she seemed to settle gratefully into the hospital’s ministrations. “They said I was quite blue, the oxygen in my blood was down to nothing.” Rather gaily, she described the emergency-room doctors thrusting some violent sucking instrument down her throat and into her lungs.

Her bathrobe was turquoise with a maroon hem; she ordered her clothes from catalogues now and was attracted to loud colors. With her white hair all about her on the pillow, and the baby-blue oxygen tubes making a mustache, and the identification bracelet looped on her wrist, she looked festive and hectic and feminized. All day, young men in antiseptic garb came and tended to her, cutting her toenails, interrogating her bowels. Her bowels, to Joey’s embarrassment, had become a topic of supreme fascination to her. Her insides in general were brought uncomfortably close to the surface by the erosion of her body. His father’s method of coping with what seemed to Joey her unaccountable whims, including moving them all to the farm, had been to say, “She’s a femme. Your mother’s a real femme. What can you do?” He would shrug, and sometimes add, “I should have put her on the burleycue stage.”

This had seemed one of the man’s lofty, pained jokes; but now her femininity, which Joey’s father and then his succession of wives had shielded him from, was upon him. In her slightly dishevelled, revealing gowns, in her gracefully accepted helplessness and fragility, in this atmosphere of frank bodily event, his mother had her sex on her mind. She told him, remembering the first years of her marriage, in Pittsburgh, “There was this young doctor, Dr. Langhorne over on Sixth Street, who, when I went to him with these pains on my chest I couldn’t understand, told me to take off my clothes. Well, I trusted him, and did, and he looked me over for the longest time, and then told me, ‘You’re not obese.’ That was all he said.”

Her conviction, prior to Joey’s birth, that she couldn’t do such a normal thing as conceive and bear a child recurred in her self-accounting; old Dr. Mull, who kept brusquely calming her fears, who treated her as a normal woman and not as the monstrous product of her own mother’s agony, emerged as a kind of erotic hero, who swept her off her feet. “He told me to stop talking nonsense and trust in nature, and so I did, and the result was this beautiful boy!” Joey suddenly saw that his own self, which he had imagined she cherished for qualities all his own, was lovable to her above all as a piece of her body, as a living proof of her womanhood.

And she recalled, of those straitened Depression days when he was an infant, how she left him in the care of his grandparents and went off on the trolley car to work in the drapes department of the department store downtown. She had lost a tooth, a bicuspid, and the upper partial plate containing its replacement was uncomfortable, and one day she didn’t wear it to work and was chastised by the department manager, Mr. Wertheimer, for not wearing it. The image of her missing tooth, this tidy black hole leaping up within her young woman’s smile, seemed erotic, too, along with the thought of his then-slender mother’s charm as a saleswoman. “On my good days,” she claimed, “I could sell anything. But then the people would bring it all back for exchange on Monday. As if I had bewitched them. Mr. Wertheimer said there was such a thing as being *too* good.”

But not all her days were good days, she told Joey. She took her periods too hard, they knocked her flat for thirty-six, forty-eight hours; and this brought the conversation back to her body, her body arching over his life like a firmament, and he would leave the hospital building and find relief in the body of the city, Alton with its close-packed suburbs, a city he loved as his mother loved her farm, because it had formed his first impressions, when the wax was soft. He ate at aluminum diners where each booth still had its individual jukebox, shopped at hardware stores for parts and tools the sandstone farmhouse in its decrepitude needed, and bought a new vacuum cleaner to replace his mother’s old Hoover, which had on its front a little electric light like that of his toy electric train as it circled the Christmas tree. He got himself a haircut in a front-parlor barber shop, the kind of shop, with a radio playing and a baby crying in rooms out of sight, and a spiral pole out front, that he thought had disappeared, because such shops had disappeared in New York. A small child of his, years ago, had knocked the porcelain lid off the toilet water tank and it had shattered. Now, between visits to his mother, he went about the city with the cardboard box of fragments, dusty and cobweb-ridden after years in the attic, to plumbing supply houses, where overweight, hard-smoking, not quite sardonic men would return from digging in their cavernous storerooms and give him, for a few dollars, old spare lids that did not, it would turn out, quite fit. He kept trying. Alton had lost factories and population since he was a boy, and appeared in smaller letters on the maps of Pennsylvania, but it was still a place where things were made and handled, where brute matter got its honest due. He still shared the city’s blue-collar faith in hardware and industry and repair, a humble faith that had survived all his heady traffic in sheer imagery—slogans, graphics, layouts.

What was life at bottom but plumbing? After a week, the hospital had cleared out his mother’s lungs, and now the cardiologists wanted to operate on the malfunctioning heart that had let the pulmonary edema occur. The angiography had revealed coronary arteries stenosed all but shut. “Oh, Joey—I could go any day,” she blurted to him after the test results had been described to her. She showed him with a forefinger and thumb how small and pinched the lumen had become. “Worse than they thought.” She was sitting on the bed with her hair wild and one shoulder bared by a loose tie in the hospital johnny. Her facial expression was girlish, womanhood’s acquired composure all dissolved. Their intermittently shared life was being lifted into new octaves, and mother and son seemed in these moments of hospital conference simply a man and a woman, both with more white hairs than dark, taking counsel because no one else whose advice would count was left on earth.

To his relief, she did not want the open-heart operation, thus sparing him the trouble, the expense, the tests, the trips to Philadelphia. He tried to suppress his relief and to argue for the coronary bypass that was recommended, though she was well over eighty. She said, making a wryly twisted mouth just as her father used to when discussing the county’s politicians, “Of course, *they* recommend it. It’s what they have to sell. They’re in business, just like their fathers, only peddling different things. They pass me around, one to another; I’ve yet to see a Christian.”

In the frankness that her closeness to death allowed, as her composed womanhood melted, an anti-Semitism was one of the things that emerged. She could not see the predominantly Jewish doctors as saviors and allies but only as opportunists and exploiters. She even developed with one solemn young cardiologist a banter that cast her as a Palestinian: “You’ve taken me away from my village,” she said. Joey was dismayed; his third wife, the briefest one, had been Jewish, and she and his mother had seemed especially friendly, and as he imagined now his mother’s unspoken feelings in those years it was like seeing silverfish tumble out of old books. On her less lucid days, she seemed to think that the doctors and their allies (“One big fella, looked just like Danny Thomas, came and cut my toenails; now, how much do you think *that’s* going to add to the bill?”) were scheming to do her out of her house and its priceless eighty acres—that she was territory they wanted to seize and develop. Each day she spent in the hospital, the little sandstone house pulled at her harder. “Get me home,” she begged Joey.

“And then what?”

“Then we’ll take what comes.” Her eyes widened, watching his, and her mouth as it clamped shut over “what comes” was very like a child’s, stubborn in its fright. For, however close their consultations, however fervent their agreements, both were aware that she was the star and he merely the prompter: though his turn would come, the spotlight burned upon her. She was center stage, in this drama whose climax everyone knows.

When, six months later, she died—instantly, it seemed to the coroner—in the kitchen, just under the room where she had been born, the neighbors, who were patient Mennonites and Lutherans, took a day to discover her body and another twelve hours to find him in at his apartment telephone number. He had been working late. It was midnight when he let himself into the old farmhouse. The door keys had been lost long ago, in that distant, fabulous era after they had moved. When his mother was to be away for more than a day, she would lock the doors from the inside and go out through the cellar bulkhead. Her neighbors knew this and had left the house like that after her body was removed. Joey had brought no flashlight; after parking the car by the barn, he walked to the slanted cellar doors by moonlight, and within the dark cellar was guided by memory. A Lally column here, a pyramid of paint cans there. His father and he had laid this cement floor one frantic day when three cubic yards of ready-mixed concrete were delivered in a giant gob by a truck. He would have been fifteen or so, his father in his late forties. The cellar floor of these old farmhouses was typically dirt, the red clay of the region packed more or less hard, except when the foundation walls wept in the spring and it turned to mud. His father had talked with construction men, and set out boards to frame the platform for the furnace, and dug a clay pipe into the dirt for drainage, and stretched strings here and there to determine the level and pitch, but none of these preparations encompassed the alarming dimensions of the slowly hardening concrete when it arrived early that Saturday morning. With rakes and shovels and boards and trowels they pushed and tugged the sluggish stuff level, into the far corners, under the cellar stairs, and up to the mouth of the drainage pipe. His father’s face went white with effort, as it had when he struggled with the chimney stones several years before, and the ordeal went on and on, by the light of a few bare bulbs, this panicky race with time and matter, as the concrete grew stiffer and stiffer, and in drying pushed its water toward the surface, and exuded its sonorous underground odor, its secretive smell of stone. The floor had come out surprisingly well, out of that day’s sweaty panic—smooth and gray and delicately sloped so that hardly a puddle lingered after a flooding. It sometimes seemed, in the mottled perspectives of hindsight, that there had been a third man in the cellar with them, something of a professional, for it seemed unlikely that he and his father, a would-be poet and a soc.-sci. teacher, could have made such a satisfactory cellar floor. But if there had been such a man, Joey had mentally erased him, jealous of this arduous day at his father’s side fending off disaster, doing a man’s job. He was just becoming a man, and his father was wearying of being one; this was the last project so ambitious that he tackled around the house.

In the basement’s absolute blackness, Joey’s city shoes slithered on the smooth floor, and then thumped on the wooden cellar stairs; he pushed the door open into the moon-striped kitchen. A warm whimpering hairy body hurtled up against him, and he thought that his mother had not died after all. But it was the dog, who took his hand in her mouth and unstoppably whimpered and whined as if telling him a long story, the story of her hours alone in the house with her mistress, with the unresponsive, cooling body, with her doggy hunger and bafflement.

Things work out. One of Joey’s former wives, Peggy, who had remarried into the Connecticut suburbs, agreed to take the dog. The cats a man from the county humane society came and trapped and carried away to be gassed, a few each day, frantically fighting the cage. Joey stacked the magazines and catalogues and Christmas cards and tied them with baling twine from the bucket and carried them to the barn to be trucked by a Mennonite neighbor to a landfill. The Boy Scouts no longer collected paper and bottles; nothing was precious any more, there was too much of everything. As his family assembled, Joey impressed them with his efficiency, portioning out the furniture and heirlooms among his children, his ex-wives, the local auctioneer, the junkman.

For himself he kept little but odd small items that reached back into his boyhood in the brick house from which they moved to the farm—a brass tiger that sat on the piano there, when he still took piano lessons, and a curved leather-backed brush he remembered his grandfather using on his black hightop shoes before setting off on foot to the Lutheran church. He kept some of his father’s college notebooks, preserved in the attic, penned in a more rounded version of his legible schoolteacherish hand. He kept a set of Shakespeare, with limp maroon covers, of which the silverfish had nibbled some pages into lace.

His mother as a young woman, a feminine purchaser of slips and stockings and jewelry, drew suddenly close to him, after the decades in which she had been old. Inexpensive pieces of silver and turquoise and jade, Art Deco–ish, from the Twenties and Thirties, in surprising quantity, testified to a certain vanity, a voluptuous need for ornament. His mother’s many country sun hats were hard to throw away, though none of the assembled females wanted them. Joey’s two daughters sorted through the clothes for him. He couldn’t bear to touch and discard the dresses hanging in the closet, dozens of garments pressed together in an anthology of past fashions, all the way back to a fox-trimmed spring coat whose collar he remembered with an odd vividness, its tingling black-tipped red-brown hairs close to her face: his mother was carrying him, against her shoulder.

In the toolhouse, where his father had left a pathetic legacy of rusty screws and nails neatly arranged in jars, and oily tools, half of them broken, mounted on rotting pegboard, there were also antique implements worn like prehistoric artifacts: an ancient oblong pink whetstone pointed at either end and soapily warped by all its use, and an old-fashioned square hoe worn into a lopsided metal oval, its edges had struck so many stones. Such wear couldn’t have occurred in the merely forty years they were here, but must have been the work of generations; these tools had travelled back and forth across the county, surviving many moves, to end in his impatient hands. They seemed sacred—runes no one else could decipher. He was the last of his line to have ever hoed a row of kohlrabi or sharpened a scythe while standing knee-deep in the nodding damp grass of an orchard.

Relatives and neighbors spoke to him with a soft gravity, as if he were fragile in grief. He knew he and his mother were regarded as having been unusually, perhaps unnaturally close; when in fact between themselves the fear was that they were not close enough. Why grieve? She was old, in pain, worn-out. She was too frail in her last half-year to walk to the mailbox or lift a case of cat food or pull a clump of burdock: it was time; dying is the last favor we do the world, the last tax we pay. He cried only once, during the funeral, quite unexpectedly, having taken his seat at the head of his raggedly extended family, suddenly free, for the moment, of arrangements and decisions. An arm’s reach away from him gleamed the cherry-wood casket he had picked out in the undertaker’s satiny basement showroom three days before. The lustrous well-joined wood, soon to be buried—the sumptuous waste of it. She was in there, and in his mind there appeared a mother conceived out of his earliest memories of her, a young slim woman dressed in a navy-blue suit, with white at her throat, dressed to go off to her job at the downtown department store, hurrying to catch the trolley car. She had once reminisced, “Oh, how you’d run, and if you just missed it, there wouldn’t be another for twenty minutes, and you wanted to cry.” She had laughed, remembering.

His tears came and kept coming, in a kind of triumph, a breakthrough, a torrent of empathy and pity for that lost young woman running past the Pennsylvania row houses, under the buttonwood trees, running to catch the trolley, the world of the Thirties shabby and solid around her, the porches, the blue mid-summer hydrangeas, this tiny well-dressed figure in her diminishing pocket of time, her future unknown, her death, her farm, far from her mind. This was the mother, apparently, that he had loved, the young woman living with him and others in a brick semi-detached house, a woman of the world, youthfully finding her way. During the war she worked in a parachute factory, wearing a bandanna on her head like the other women, plump like them by this time, merging with them and their chatter one lunch break when he, somehow, had bicycled to the side entrance to see her. She was not like them, the tough other women, he knew, but for the moment had blended with them, did a job alongside them, and this too renewed his tears, his naïve pride in her then, when he was ten or eleven. She had tried to be a person, she had lived. There was something amazing, something immortal to him in the image of her running. He remembered, from their first years on the farm, a crisis with the roof; it was being reshingled by a team of Amishmen and they had left it partially open to the weather on the night of a thunderstorm. Crashes, flashes. Joey’s parents and grandparents were all awake, and he, boy though he still was, was expected now to wake and help, too; they rushed up and down the attic stairs with buckets, to save the plaster of the walls and ceilings below. There was a tarpaulin in the barn that might help; he found himself outdoors, in the downpour, and he had retained an image of his mother running across the lawn in a flash of lightning that caught the white of her bare legs. She would not have been much over forty, and was still athletic; perhaps his father was included in this unsteady glimpse; there was a hilarity to it all, a violent health.

Working his way, after her death, through all the accumulated souvenirs of her life, Joey was fascinated by the college yearbooks that preserved her girlish image. Group photographs showed his mother as part of the hockey team, the hiking club. With a magnifying glass he studied her unsmiling, competitive face, with her hair in two balls at her ears and a headband over her bangs. Her face seemed slightly larger than the other girls’, a childlike oval broadest at the brow, its defenses relatively unevolved. As he sat there beside the cherry casket crying, his former wives and adult children stealing nervous peeks at him, the young woman ran for the trolley car, her breath catching, her panting mixed with a sighing laughter at herself, and the image was as potent, as fertile, as a classic advertisement, which endlessly taps something deep and needy within us. The image of her running down the street, away from him, trailed like a comet’s tail the maternal enactments of those misty years when he was a child—crayoning with him on the living-room floor, sewing him Halloween costumes in the shape of Disney creatures, having him lift what she called the “skirts” of the bushes in the lawn while she pushed the old reel mower under them—but from her point of view; he seemed to feel from within his mother’s head the situation, herself and this small son, this defenseless gurgling hatched creature, and the tentative motions of her mind and instincts as she, as new to mothering as he was to being alive, explored the terrain between them. In the attic he had found a padded baby-blue scrapbook, conscientiously maintained, containing his first words, the date of his first crawl, and his hospital birth certificate imprinted with his inky day-old feet. The baths. The cod-liver oil. The calls to the doctor, the subscriptions to children’s magazines, the sweaters she knit. Trying to do the right thing, the normal thing, running toward her farm, her death. In his vision of her running she was bright and quick and small, like an animal caught in a gunsight. This was the mother Joey had loved, the mother before they moved, before she betrayed him with the farm and its sandstone house.

Ruthlessly, vengefully, weekend by weekend, he cleaned the place out—disconnecting the phone, giving the auctioneer the run of the attic, seeing the refrigerator and stove hauled off for a few dollars each, by a truck that got stuck in the muddy winter lawn. With his new vacuum cleaner Joey attacked the emptying rooms, sucking up the allergen-rich dust from the cracks between the floorboards, sweeping the walls and ceilings clean of their veils of cobwebs upon cobwebs. How satisfying this was, one room after another that he would not have to do again. Joey discovered that his mother had been far from alone in the house; while the cats mewed and milled outside on the porch, a tribe of mice, year after year, ancestors and descendants, had been fed sunflower seeds, whose accumulated stored husks burst forth by the bucketful from behind where the stained-pine corner cupboard had stood, and from the back of the dish-towel drawer of the kitchen sink. He set traps for the mice. He set out d-Con, and the next weekend tossed the small stiff bodies, held gingerly by the tail, down into the swamp, where the chimney rocks, and the ashes of his grandmother’s mattress, had joined earth’s stately recycling.

The old house had curious small cabinets built into the stone thickness, and they disgorged packets of his father’s index cards, riddled with anxious reminder notes to himself, and pads of old high-school permission slips, and small boxes of dull pencils and hardened erasers, and playing cards from the remote days when he and his parents played three-handed pinochle at the dining table. At first, he could scarcely hold the cards, sixteen fanned in one little hand, and would stifle tears when his meld was poor and he lost. Once at the farm, they were too busy to play cards ever again. There were animals of petrified Play-Doh made by Joey’s children, and useless pretty vases and bowls sent distractedly as seasonal gifts from Bloomingdale’s, and plush-bound old-fashioned albums, with little mildewed mirrors on the covers, of stiffly posed ancestors he could not identify. His mother had offered, over the years, to teach him their names and exact relation to him, but he had not been interested, and now she was not there to ask, and his ancestors floated free and nameless, like angels.

There were things she had offered to tell him he had not wanted to hear. “What didn’t you like about him?” he had once asked her—a bit impatiently, tiring of her voice—about his father.

Sitting in her television-watching chair, her weight and strength so wasted that only her mouth and mind could move, she had been telling him about her youthful romantic life. She had gone to a one-room country school—when she was dead, he came upon a photograph of the student body and its corpulent mustachioed instructor, his mother’s broad little face squinting toward the camera under a ponderous crown of wound braids. Among the other children there had been a dark-haired, dark-eyed boy whom she had fancied, and who had fancied her. But her parents had disapproved of the boy’s “people,” and of several other dark-eyed substitutes that over the years she had offered them. Not until Joey’s blondish, pale-eyed father did she bring home a suitor they could endorse. “They liked him, and he liked them. I’ll say this for your father, not every man could have lived with his in-laws that cheerfully all those years. He really admired my mother, that style of little woman. Energetic little women—he loved them. He thought they could make money for him. It’s true, Mother was a money-maker. She was the one who got up in the dark to drive the cart into Alton to market. The tobacco they retired on had been her project. But admiring Mother was no reason to marry me. I was *big*. It was a mistake, and we both knew it. We knew it the first day of our honeymoon.” Joey had often heard his mother’s views on little women, how they have the best of it, and take the men from the big women like herself, big women who have tortured their little mothers in the birthing. Behind these formulations there was something—about sex, he believed—that he didn’t want, as a boy or a man, to hear. *A real femme*. Even as a very small child he had been aware of a weight of anger his mother carried; he had quickly evolved—first word, first crawl—an adroitness at staying out of her way when she was heavy with it, and a wish to amuse her, to keep her light. But now, as they were nearing the end of their time together, and her flesh was dissolving and her inner self rising to the surface, his responses had become more daring, less catering, even challenging. Her own pale eyes, a blue faintly milky though she had never needed a cataract operation, widened at his question as if she were seeing ghosts over his shoulder. “Oh, Joey,” she said, “don’t ask. It was un*speak*able.”

He had to smile at the old-fashioned concept. “Unspeakable? Daddy?”

A bit of flush had crept into her colorless creased cheeks. She was getting angry, once again. She kept staring, not so much at him as at the space in his vicinity. She knew from watching television what the talk shows permitted people to say these days. “Well, maybe you’re old enough. Maybe I *should* speak it.”

“Oh no, no thanks, that’s all right,” he said, jumping up from his chair and heading into the kitchen, much as his father used to in the middle of a marital exchange. *Poor Daddy*, was his thought. *Let the dead alone*. Now she, too, was dead, and there were many things, once speakable, that Joey would never know. Though he grew used to the sandstone house without her in it, he still found it strange, back in his Manhattan apartment, that she never called on Saturday mornings the way she used to, with her playful, self-mocking account of her week. The dead are so feeble they can’t even telephone. The phone’s silence more than any other conveyed the peace of the dead, their final and, as it were, hostile withdrawal.

The real-estate appraiser, an old high-school classmate, stood in his gray suit in the cobwebbed cellar, next to the rickety oil furnace, among the paint cans and rusty hot-air ducts, and said to Joey, “Seventeen years here alone. It took a lot of guts.”

Yes, she had been brave, he could now afford to see, all those years alone, alone but for the animals she fed, and the presences on television. Over the telephone, even when reporting an insomniac night of breathlessness and terror, she had tried to keep it light for his sake, and mocked herself, mocking her very will, at the age of eighty-five, to live. “It’s strange,” she confessed to her son, “but I really don’t intend to die. Though a lot of people would like me to.”

“Really? Who?”

“The real-estate developers. The neighbors. They think it’s time for this old lady to move over and make some room.”

“Do they really?” He was grateful she had not included him among the many who wished her dead.

“Really,” she mocked. “But I have a responsibility here. The place still needs me.”

“We all need you,” Joey said, sighing, giving up. The fate of the place was another unspeakable matter. She wanted the place to go on and on, unchanged, as it was in her idea of it.

He had scanned her in vain for some sign of sunset resignation. She had choked down her pills and vitamins to the end, and her fear of life’s sensations’ ceasing had seemed pure. The last time he had visited, on a cool fall day, she came outdoors to supervise his planting, in two arcs by a curve of the cement walk, two dozen tulip bulbs she had ordered from a catalogue. At first he had arranged the bulbs point down, and then realized that the point was what would grow upward, toward the sun. His mother had stood there on her unsteady feet, in her gaudy bathrobe, looking down; the sight of the fat cream-white bulbs nested in the turned red earth startled a kind of grunt out of her. “Oh, how dear they look,” she said. To Joey she added, as his encouraging mother, “How nicely you do things.”

In all of her leavings that came to light he was most touched by her accounts—her tax forms and used checkbooks, meticulously kept, even though her tiny backward-slanting hand had become spasmodic and shaky. (Could that big pencilled handwriting on the back of the enlarged photograph have been hers after all, at the age of thirteen?) She had kept, on a large pad of green paper, spreadsheets of her monthly expenses, ruled off by hand at the beginning of each month. The last entries had been made the day before the morning of her death. This financial and mathematical niceness of hers was something quite unpredictable, like a musical passion in a banker. Among the stored sheets of figures were several drawn up before they moved, with lists of expenses side by side—taxes, heating, utilities, upkeep. Absurdly small amounts they now seemed, having loomed so large in that price-frozen wartime world. By her calculations, their reduced costs in the little sandstone house, and the projected rentals of their eighty acres to the neighboring farmers, would save them five hundred dollars—a third of her husband’s salary. It had never really occurred to Joey that their move here had had a practical side. When he came to sheets showing how the money for his college education could be squeezed out among their other expenses, he couldn’t bear to keep reading.

Gradually, through the stark months of a winter that was, according to the forecasters, unseasonably cold, and then unseasonably warm, he reduced the house to its essence, removing every trace, even a rusty pencil sharpener screwed to a windowsill, of his life and the four lives that had ended. Here on this patch of now uncarpeted wood his grandfather had fallen, having convulsively leaped from the bed where, a year later, his widow would breathe her last. Here, in the bedroom adjacent, his father one midnight had sat up with such pains in his chest that he finally asked his wife to call the ambulance. He had died in the ambulance. Here in this same space Joey had lain sleepless, wondering how to tell his mother of his next divorce. Here on the other side of the wall he would lie after a date, his head still whirling with cigarette smoke and the girl’s perfume. Here on the worn linoleum his mother had died, at the base of a wall she had the Amish carpenters make of old chestnut boards, boards left in the barn from the era before the blight, to cover the rough stones exposed when the big kitchen chimney had been removed. The rooms had a soft beauty, empty. The uncovered pine floorboards drank the sunlight. Joey looked through the curtainless windows, seeing what his mother had seen—the sloping old orchard to the north, the barn and road and fields to the east, the lilac bushes and bird feeder and meadow to the south, the woods and the tall blue spruce to the west. Each day the sun would set behind the woods, in a blood-red blazon of concentric fire.

On his final cleanup visit, Joey found floating in the bathroom toilet something devil-like—a small dark stiff shape, in size between a mouse and a rat, its legs connected by webs of skin. A flying squirrel. It had come down from the attic and drowned, sick and thirsty from the d-Con. Joey remembered watching at twilight, that summer he moved the stones, a pair of flying squirrels sail, as if sliding swiftly on a wire, from the attic window over to the blue spruce. The house had stood empty the previous summer, before his family had moved in, and this pair had moved in ahead of them.

He had bought a padlock for the cellar bulkhead, and closed the house with a key, having installed new locks. The house was ready for sale in the spring. But in the meantime, as he lay awake in his apartment three hours away, its emptiness called to him. It needed him. Only he understood it. Suppose a fire, or local vandals, jealous of the price the place would fetch … Housing developments were all around, and even Philadelphians were moving into the area. His mother had made a shrewd investment, buying back paradise.

Those weekends alone in the house, sorting, cleaning, staying away from the motel until moonlight had replaced sunlight on the floors, Joey had discovered himself talking aloud, as if in response to a friendly presence just behind the dry old wallpaper, within the thick stone walls. Weeknights, his own rooms, suspended above Manhattan’s steady roar, with an ornamental piece of porch bannister hidden at the back of a closet, seemed to be flying somewhere. He felt guilty, anxious, displaced. He had always wanted to be where the action was, and what action there was, it turned out, had been back there.