# The Other Side of the Street

# John Updike

“For that,” his lawyer told Rentschler, “you need a notary public. In this state they’re the ones who handle car title changes.” Rentschler hadn’t lived in his home state for forty years, and only his mother’s death had brought him back. He was taking possession of his meagre inheritance, cleaning out her sad, crammed apartment. Rentschler lived far to the west, and the climate and the vegetation and even the quality of light here in Pennsylvania seemed alien. The afternoon light was dying at the windows; the leafless trees in the courtyard below were sinking into a well of darkness, with a silvery November glitter, as if after an ice storm, gleaming on their upper twigs. He looked in the phone book under Notaries Public, and the address 262 Chestnut Street, Hayesville, leaped to his eye. A woman, Georgene R. Mueller. She answered the phone and sounded excessively cheerful and helpful; but perhaps that was just the regional manner, which Rentschler had slowly lost. He suggested that, late as it was, their transaction must wait until tomorrow. But she told him, going that extra mile, the way the inhabitants of this part of the world did, “No, I’m open here until eight. A lot of the people, you know, can’t get to you except in the evenings. You’ll need the car title, the insurance card, your own driver’s license, and what we call the Short Certificate. It’ll say ‘Short Certificate—Letters Testamentary’ across the top.”

“Yes, I have those. My lawyer gave me plenty.”

“Now let me tell you how to find my house. You come out the Ephrata Pike—”

“I know,” Rentschler interrupted. “I used to live across the street, at two sixty-one.”

“Did you, though? What did you say your name was?”

He told her, but it rang no bell. “It was a long time ago,” he apologized. “Just after the war. I was a child. We moved when I was twelve.”

“Is that an honest fact? Well, it’s still a house to be proud of. The Brubakers sold it, you know.” This name meant nothing to him. “A younger couple has bought it, and sold off the back half of the lot.”

“Really? It wasn’t that big a lot in the first place.” The vegetable garden had been down there, and his mother’s rows of peonies, and the asbestos-shingled chicken house his grandfather had had built, and the little fenced-in yard where his grandmother used to behead chickens with a hatchet, on a stained old stump. Within the chicken house there was a liquid clucking, and a musty stench of chicken dung, and there were fascinating glass eggs scattered about in the straw to give the stupid hens the idea of laying.

“Well, I know,” Georgene Mueller sighed, “but that’s how they do things these days. They crowd the houses in. This is considered a desirable neighborhood.”

“It always was,” Rentschler told her. “My grandparents bought it back in the Twenties. If you really don’t mind, I’ll be there around seven. I should get a bite to eat first; I’ve been lugging junk all day.” There was no need to tell her all this, but perhaps he was gaining back the garrulous local manner.

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He knew the way in his bones, but was slightly confused by the traffic lights, which had multiplied in Hayesville since he was last there. A mall spread itself where there had been fields. A new high school, flat and low, reminded him of an airport. Along the low side of Chestnut Street, the trees had been cut down and the curb pushed back. Without the trees, his old street had a bareness that made the houses—some frame, some brick—appear exposed and shabby. Along the low-side curb fresh erect NO PARKING signs had sprouted; he parked anyway. The cement retaining walls on the other side of the street had developed bulges and cracks since he was a child—or else a child never noticed such things—and the long flights of steps, with iron-pipe railings, up to the porches of the houses had a gaunt, cockeyed look. To a child’s eyes these steps had appeared grand. You climbed them and found magical pleasures at the top: a squeaking porch glider from which to watch the traffic go by below, a plushy front parlor with its shade drawn and a tinted big goblet of hard candy on a polished end table, a back yard with a double garden swing in a kind of bower of hollyhocks and morning glories, and a cement walk going back, straight as an arrow, toward the alley where the ice plant was. Beyond the alley had been a large vacant lot where in the summer travelling amusement parks set up their tents and rides and gambling games, and two girls in white cowgirl outfits sang at night.

Rentschler had lived on the low side of the street, with his family’s yard sloping down to the truck garden and the chicken house. The elevated houses across the street had seemed to be more alive than his, more packed with blessings. At 260, next door to the similar house with a lighted PUBLIC NOTARY sign in the window of a glassed-in front porch, had lived the Emmelfosses. Wilma Anna had been a girl a year older than he; she always went to school in fussy dresses such as the other girls wore only to Sunday School. At Christmastime Wilma Anna’s front parlor acquired a big long-needled evergreen; he remembered the sticky rich scent of pine sap, and the tree ornaments so antique he wondered if elves had made them, and the expensive department-store look of the brightly wrapped presents. The furniture in Wilma Anna’s house all matched and wore doilies, and shelves of polished knickknacks were hung on the walls; the lampshades had tassels. When the Christmas tree was crowded in, the parlor seemed a magical cave you had to wriggle into, holding your breath.

At that time, an old woman had lived next door, at 262. Rentschler had forgotten her name. She wore cotton house-dresses that buttoned down the front—a figure of fun and dread, living alone. At Halloween, she turned off all her lights and wouldn’t come to the door when children rang the bell in their costumes. As Rentschler climbed the steps, his heart beat harder; he rang a bell beneath where a small rectangular light glowed. With his hand on the storm-door latch, he could feel the house tremble as its owner approached from the back, walking through the rooms. The old woman was dead, he kept telling himself.

A woman younger than he came to the door. Hayesville women beyond a certain age were of two types only: overweight or wiry. Georgene Mueller was one of the wiry ones, with a quick darting head of tight solid-black curls, and eyeglass frames of several colors and substances. Her mouth seemed to be a mechanism that functioned whether or not she was paying attention to it. “I didn’t hear the ring for a second, I was just finishing putting in the dishes and watching the first part of the news—it almost makes you feel sorry for Mr. Gorbachev, he must wonder what’s going to happen next, and Mr. Bush can do no wrong it seems, everything he touches turns to gold.”

“That could change,” Rentschler said, a bit lost amid the wide perspectives she had so readily opened up.

“Yes, the way the world is now, especially with these Arabs,” she said, nevertheless moving past him toward her seat of business. Her desk and typewriter were set up in the sun porch, under several framed empowering certificates.

“I’m the man who called about an hour ago—”

“About the car title,” she finished for him. “I recognize your voice.” An out-of-state voice, he supposed he had now. He handed her the papers he had assembled. Not quite challengingly, she said, “You had no trouble finding me, I suppose.”

“No, but there are more traffic lights than I remember.”

“And still it’s a tangle down at the corner at five o’clock. And even on Saturdays and Sundays now. It’s the new mall toward Quarrytown has done it.”

“Is the quarry still there? We used to swim in it, and iceskate on it when it was cold enough. A lot of winters, though, it never did quite freeze. It was frustrating, if you had the skates, since they wouldn’t fit next year.” His own mouth seemed to be running a lot. It excited him to be on this side of the street, the other side, looking through this woman’s windows at his old house, with its steep-pitched roof and plump porch pillars. To Rentschler as a child the front of the house had been a face—the two bedroom windows a pair of eyes close together, and the porch roof a sort of mustache, and the door and windows gleaming teeth. The striped awning in summer became another sort of teeth. He now had the view of the house that the crabby old lady had had. She often must have seen him go in and out the front door. Old women living alone look out their windows. Rentschler’s mother, it occurred to him, must have often looked out of hers, down into that stony courtyard.

“The hole in the ground is still there, but I believe they’ve fenced it off. Too dangerous. A boy drowned twenty or so years ago.” And in Rentschler’s childhood, too, it was said that a boy had drowned, twenty or so years before. Dead children haunt the earth, to scare the living into obedience. “Everything’s here,” the woman said, “except I need your registration card. This is the certificate the state gives you, but there’s also a little card.”

“Maybe it’s in my mother’s car. She didn’t drive too much, toward the end.”

Georgene Mueller did not offer sympathy. Death to her was a matter of paperwork. Yet her advice was kind. “You look in your mother’s glove compartment,” she said, as to a child, “and I’ll bet you’ll find the little card I’m talking about.”

“I don’t know,” he said, rising. “She was pretty, uh, out of it the last year or so.”

“That’s how they get. My mother did, too. They go back.”

Rentschler understood the local expression: “going back,” for regressing, for turning senile. No natural process went unnamed in Hayesville. Nature was the great spectacle; people sat on their porches to watch it go by.

He went outdoors, into the cool misty night, on the deeply familiar street. On these very sidewalk squares, Wilma Anna and he had laid out hopscotch courts with colored chalks, and played with a rubber heel that if thrown wrong would bounce and bobble into the gutter, where the water from the ice plant ran. He found the registration card immediately, in the blue Velcro-fastened folder the automobile manufacturer provided. The dead try to take care of us. His mother had been depressed toward the end but not senile. Precise instructions regarding her funeral had been folded in her upper left-hand desk drawer, with her bank books and tax forms. His heart swelled in his chest at the unaccustomed effort of climbing the cement steps again. He wondered if people who lived on this side of the street lived longer, from the exercise. The land was flat where he lived now, with snow-tipped mountains unreal in the distance.

As the notary typed away at her long, pale-green forms, he sat beside her desk, looking across the street, and told her, “We used to have a hedge, all around. In a kind of pattern, with raised pieces at intervals; we had this funny heavy long trimmer you cranked, to make the teeth go back and forth. It took two people to operate it, my mother and grandfather usually. And bushes, we had a lot of bushes to trim. The front yard looks pretty bare now.” *Stop talking*, he told himself.

“When they widened the street, they pushed back the sidewalks on that side.”

“Yes, and took down the horse chestnuts. We used to collect them.”

“Children do,” she said, still typing.

Rentschler held his tongue, helpless to convey to her the peculiar wealth of a wagonful of horse chestnuts in their glossiness, their faint punky smell, their oval spots of pallor like the belly on a teddy bear. “The place was a lot of work to keep up,” he felt compelled to volunteer. “But that wasn’t why we moved. My father lost his job in ’45 because a returning veteran took it back and we had to move down to Wilmington, where there was work. My mother moved back to the area when my father died, since she had a sister still living here, to this apartment in town she always hated, though she never complained. I suppose she would have liked to live with me, but I had a wife at the time.”

“There’s a lot of heartbreak,” Georgene Mueller admitted, frowning into the desk light as she rubbed the green form with a typewriter eraser. “It’s a handsome house. Even without the shutters and the awnings. They came down about ten years ago, my husband and I were here already.”

“I used to wish I lived on this side of the street,” Rentschler confessed. “It seemed, I don’t know, more fun over on this side, even though the houses were smaller.”

“This sun porch is a Godsend,” the woman said. “Without it, I’d have no place to set up shop. In the dead of winter, you’d be surprised how the sun warms it up—I have an electric heater but hardly ever have to turn it on.” With a smart twirl of the platen she freed the paper from the typewriter. She sorted out the duplicates, with a grimace of effort pressed her notary seal into the original and the carbon copies, and gave him back the cards and papers she didn’t need. Yes, he remembered, this was how people did things in Pennsylvania: seriously, thoroughly. Life had weight here. The total, her fee and the commonwealth’s, came to twenty-nine dollars. She clipped his checks to her papers and showed him the envelope in which she would send his application for title transfer to Harrisburg first thing in the morning. At the conclusion of her instructions, she asked, “Would you like to see the house?”

Rentschler had been gazing so steadily at the house across the street that it took him a second to realize she meant her own. “Sure,” he said. “I’ve never been in it before. The old lady who lived here when I was a kid hated kids.” The swish of traffic was slackening on Chestnut Street, and there were no lights on at the front of his old house, just an unsteady upstairs phosphorescence indicating the presence of a television set, or perhaps an aquarium with a flickering bulb. From that lonely house he would cross Chestnut Street and come play with Wilma Anna. In her back yard there was an enchanted, luxurious plaything, a white wooden swing, two facing seats suspended in a frame upon which morning glories had been encouraged to grow. She in her starchy little dress would swing forward as he swung back, and then backward as he swung toward her, her face in the sun-dapple utterly solemn and dimly expectant, the way girls’ faces were, her upper lip lifted to expose a wet gleam of teeth.

Georgene Mueller’s living room, as wide as her house minus the width of a set of unused stairs, contained the usual goblet of candy on an end table, next to a sullen brown plush sofa. Noticing the direction of his eyes, she said, “Have a piece. That’s what it’s there for.”

He removed the fragile glass lid, with its round red-tinted knob. The candy was not hard, in twists of cellophane, but leftover Halloween candy: three-tone corn kernels, grinning pumpkins, and conical witches’ hats, chewy but not too gummy for his bridgework. For twenty-nine dollars, he figured he could sneak three or four, while his hostess moved into the next room. “When Jake left,” she was saying, as if Rentschler knew who Jake was, “I was so mad I took the little savings account we had and blew it on the dining room; the people before us had had it as such a dull dark room and Jake always said it was good enough, we ate in the kitchen anyway.”

The room was not dull now. Spanishness was the theme, from a wrought-iron chandelier with violet candles to wall mirrors with wide baroque frames of encrusted fake silver. Artificial beams had been placed along the ceiling, descending to jutting oaken brackets as if in a California mission, above panels of three-dimensional imitation stonework; behind the mirrors a silvery wallpaper was patterned in blown-up Victorian steel engravings, like a Max Ernst collage repeated over and over. Magical caves: that was how the houses over here had always seemed to him. “Lovely,” Rentschler said, through the chewy Halloween candy. “Really striking.”

She pondered his verdict and the walls of the room, where a few prints of staring deer, shadow-boxed in velvet, completed the effect. “It was a fancy of mine,” she said. “That’s one blessing about being alone, you can do what you want.”

Yes—you grow into the spaces the absent have left you. Rentschler had already noticed how, with the distant pressure of his mother’s existence lifted, his personality had begun to expand, distorting into a shape that half frightened him. His new talkativeness, for instance—a reaching out, where he had always taken pride in being self-reliant, going west like a tight-lipped pioneer, becoming an alien. “How long have you lived here, altogether?” he asked this other solitary. Her solid-black hair was tightly curled and her movements were brisk, even twitchy, with reserves of energy waiting to be tapped.

“Thirteen years, it’ll be. For the last seven I’ve supported myself. It’s hard,” she said, “but you make do. Your mother made do, too, I don’t doubt. I have to rent out my upstairs here, I couldn’t get by without the extra. This is my bedroom—do you mind passing through? I thought you’d like to see the back yard.”

“I would, yes. I used to play in the back yard next door.”

“She keeps it up real nice. Flowers back to the alley like her parents always had, and she just had that garden swing painted again. She cares for it like it’s a real antique.”

Rentschler was lost. “Who does?”

“Why, Wilma Anna!”

“You mean she’s still *here?*”

“Oh, sure. Still here. All alone. She never married. Though lately she has a boy friend comes calling, I never noticed one before. She goes to movies now, and shows in town. I don’t think she’s home now even, or you could go say hello.”

“Wilma Anna Emmelfoss. I can’t believe she’s still here. That was fifty years ago we used to play together.”

“Her mother went quick, but her dad, oh, he lingered something dreadful.”

“You wouldn’t believe what a pretty little girl she was, always in these dresses that seemed very fancy to everybody else. We were only children, the two of us.”

“She still dresses nice. For her work, you know. She sells advertising for the paper in town. There, you can see her swing through the kitchen window.”

Leaning over an aluminum sink, Rentschler could barely make out a patch of white in the darkness, and a blurred white framework around it: the arbor that had sheltered them as children, swinging back and forth, back and forth, a sulky quizzical look on Wilma Anna’s careful face, with its wide forehead and pointed chin, flickering through shadows and sun quicker than the eye could sort out. “Yes, I see it,” he said politely.

“And here’s my pride and joy,” said his hostess. “My little piece of heaven.” She led him out the back door, and they stared up the rise of her trim back yard, with a center walk of cement arrowing back to the alley. Rentschler’s heart seemed to swell again, pumping too hard. These secret yards, straight and narrow, had been the essence of the happiness on this side of the street: lush flower beds along the walk, a patch of lawn with some lawn furniture, a shed containing hoses and rakes, an apple tree or two to represent an orchard, low fences of picket or playground wire, each quarter-acre in strict parallel with one’s neighbors’, and the far end holding a garage and opening onto the freedom of the alley. Rentschler inhaled Hayesville happiness; he saw his entire life, past and to come, as an errant encircling of this forgotten center. His childhood back yard—the bloody stump, the frightened stupid chickens, the vegetable rows that always needed weeding—had been comparatively sad and disorderly. His family had not quite had the Hayesville secret. It was right that they had been forced to move.

He inhaled the moist darkness again and listened dimly to Georgene Mueller’s detailing of the flowers she cultivated, the quince tree whose fruit she made jelly of, the storage shed and stone bench she had ordered from a supply house—her single life stubbornly exerting its pressure back against the pressure of the world.

Returning to the gaudy kitchen, with plaid Formica on all the counters, Rentschler looked once more at Wilma Anna’s white embowering swing, and tried to imagine her life here, all those static years: it was unimaginable, like the life of a tree. For his mother’s solitude, Rentschler felt largely responsible, and amid the undercurrents of this encounter he was acquiring a hallucinatory responsibility for this woman’s—at least, a touch of guilt at the tug of her tight dyed curls, her undischarged energy. But in regard to Wilma Anna’s majestically rooted life he felt nothing but wonder.

On the way out, he was going to avoid the tempting candy, but the notary public said, “Take some. It’ll just go stale otherwise. The children don’t come around like they used to. A lot of the parents don’t let them out, what with the maniacs you read about who put poison and things in the treats.” She had suddenly become querulous, and tired. They moved in silence together through the darkened sun porch; the slight fever of their intimacy, which had peaked in the back yard, had subsided. Rentschler felt dismissed. Stepping into the glittery November chill, he was dazzled to see the house on the other side of the street ablaze; the porch light and front-room lamps were lit up as if to welcome a visitor, a visitor, it seemed clear to him, long expected and much beloved.