# His Mother Inside Him

# John Updike

Allen Dow had been fearful, in childhood, of his mother’s unhappiness, which would vent itself in sudden storms of temper that flattened the other occupants of the house into the corners and far rooms. Once he saw his father cowering under the dining table while his mother, red-faced with fury, tried to get at him to slap him again. Allen never forgave her for that—for her doing it, for his seeing it. Though he learned to get around her—indeed, no one was better at getting around her; he was her only child, her confidant, her charmer, her prince, amusing and politic—he remained wary of the rage inside her that he had been permitted to glimpse. She made him nervous, and nervousness became his mode. All the complaints of nervousness—skin rashes, stammering, asthma, insomnia—were his. It took him decades of living hundreds of miles beyond her reach to begin to breathe, to sleep, and to speak normally. The women who drew close to him in the course of his life tended to suffer, and it took no great insight of his to imagine why his heart was, in regard to their sufferings, rather aloof and cool, if not faintly exultant. Whereas with the sufferings of a child or of a man—a man cowering under the table as an alternative to hitting back, or a child helplessly watching—he was quickly empathetic. He resented it, then, when, after her death, people (second cousins, Lutheran ministers) fondly remarked on how much he, as he approached sixty, resembled his mother.

He couldn’t see it. He looked in the mirror. The fair skin, yes—freckled in his childhood, now pocked by spots of sun damage. Though her hair looked brown and had early turned gray, she had been one of nature’s redheads, and when he had grown a beard, it had come in reddish. And there was a vexed something about his forehead—a rather low forehead like his mother’s, for all their intellectual pretensions. When her temper flared, a pink V had appeared between her eyebrows; he had no temper to speak of, but there was a pink roughening of his skin exactly between his eyebrows. Otherwise—nose, mouth, ears—he saw no resemblance.

His ears were the “Hofstetter ears”—small-lobed, protuberant at the tops, like a lemur’s. He had inherited them from his grandmother, his mother’s mother; a photograph existed of her and her eleven brothers and sisters posed in black together, all with variants of these ears, sticking out white against the black. His mother’s ears, while the rest of her body had dwindled in old age, had grown larger and come to look just like her father’s, with big, flat, dull-colored lobes. As a little boy, Allen, crayoning on the floor, had often looked up and admired the impressive ears of his grandfather as the old man tilted back his head to bring the newspaper print into focus. His mother, he felt, had identified more with her father than with her mother, a tiny industrious woman toward whom her daughter had felt a compound of admiration, exasperation, and pity—somewhat the way, perhaps, in which Allen regarded his own father. His mother’s father figured in the vividest of her family tales of the past—the man returning from a tavern down a straight dirt road and greeting with harsh drunken words the little girl who had run up the road to meet him; the man, younger, working in the woods, sawing and burning trees for the “charcoal business” with his bride’s brothers; younger still, slender and unmarried, the man walking miles up and down the local hills to teach at a one-room schoolhouse. The walk took him daily through the farm where a certain young woman, the baby of her large family, spied him out and created a reason, one day of deep snow, for them to meet. We are all the result of sexual events, and their faded heat still warms us. Allen’s mother had implanted him with a set of images that entwined, flourishing and fading, among those he had acquired with his own senses.

It surprised him, unpleasantly, when his mother’s laugh, its unmistakable sly cry and shy trailing-off, came out of his mouth. And it irritated him to detect, in the workings of his brain, an increasing amount of the fanciful, self-defeating obliquity that had irritated him in her. In conversation she always resisted simple concurrence, and would nimbly take a contrary position, as if to make life, for herself and her partner in dialogue, more interesting. This curious courtesy was generally wasted, Allen had long ago observed, on the world, yet he felt in his own dealings an increasing tendency in the same direction; he couldn’t help himself, the pull of the contrary was too strong, and there was too much justice lurking in the case not being presented.

For instance: When his second wife was negotiating the price of the suburban spread where they would consolidate their married status, he found himself in the mental position of the sellers, who were desperate to move to California, and he kept proposing to his wife a worse bargain than the one she eventually managed to strike. “Whose side are you on?” she asked in exasperation, and he felt his mother inside him itching to embark on a discourse as to the small- and mean-mindedness of taking anything as simple as a single side, this being the root of all wars and exploitation. There was something very vulgar and un-Christian, this inner voice urged, about any display of self-interest. Yet in some sense, too, he was arguing *against* his mother, for she had been, in her rural realm, a considerable acquirer of acreage, adding slice after slice of neighboring property as “protection” for the acreage already possessed. She had done this, in her later years, with Allen’s money, even though he hated land—its weediness, its erosiveness, its taxability. Or, rather, he felt about land, as about his mother, ambivalent, she having planted in him the idea that land was sacred, a piece of Mother Earth, endlessly valuable, and the last thing that the vulgar self-interest-seekers of the world would manage to take from you.

So within him his mother was battling his mother, and his sensible, hard-headed wife was the exasperated recipient of a double message. His first wife, too, had been fond of land; she still queened it over a tract his diligence had supplied. It seemed to be his circular fate to settle one woman after another on a sizable property and then move on, momentarily free, until the next female real-estate developer locked him into her plans. If he had not, in his wish to avoid his mother’s temper, totally tamed his own, it might have angered him to contemplate. But, then, his mother’s contrarian voice within him urged, where would he have lived, but for these landed women? On the streets? In the trees?

When his mother died, he became the sole custodian of hundreds of small mental pictures. In the most recent, he and she were moving in and out of hospitals, stooped and slow, like one of those elderly couples in which the man looks a generation younger. Hospitals, all glossy and abounding in exits and entrances and eccentric minor characters, seem made to be sitcom sets, and his mother and he laughed at the same places in the script. When the big, black, male nurse insisted on cutting her toenails and washing her ticklish feet, Allen laughed at her account of it, while thinking secretly that it had needed to be done. Her sphere of effective supervision had so shrunk that even her feet were out of it.

Yet she looked, with her white hair flung about unpinned on her pillow, attractively wild, and the brick cityscape out the hospital windows took her back to her own city days, when she and his father had travelled through the state’s small cities as his father’s employer directed. Allen preferred her city self, the young woman predating his birth, whose aura of nervous grace clung to the young mother who would take him on the trolley car into town, to buy him a jacket for Sundays, or shoes in which he could see the bones of his feet move in an eerie green space at the bottom of a fluoroscope; or she would take him to a dance lesson, or a piano lesson, or the office of a city doctor, redolent of raincoats and Mercurochrome. Sometimes, when he thought back on it, it had been *she* who was going to the doctor, for female reasons that belonged to the dark subterrain of her unhappiness.

When she was dead and her input had ceased, he wondered about her unhappiness. Had the two of them imagined it? Her life had been no worse than most lives and better, surely, than many. Being a woman had no doubt frustrated her, keeping her at home, tying her to the fortunes of men less intelligent than herself, denying her a career. Perhaps something timid within her, even a lazy and self-indulgent something, had held her back from joining the women of her generation who did manage to make their own lives, as schoolteachers and saleswomen if not as artists and executives. This idea—that she was lazy and self-indulgent—came from her; all of Allen’s ideas came from her, save the male, boyish idea of *getting away*, of getting out into unheated, unmediated space. Even that, in truth, had been her idea; she had once taken him up on the little hill, Shale Hill, that overlooked their town and told him that some day he would leave all this, he would fly free.

She was in him not as he had been in her, as a seed becoming a little male offshoot, but as the full tracery of his perceptions and reactions; he had led his life as an extension of hers, a superior version of hers, and when she died he became custodian of a specialized semiotics, a thousand tiny nuanced understandings of her, a once commonplace language of which he was now the sole surviving speaker.

Finding human relations difficult, she had turned to nature for comfort, and now, as he aged, the vast, restless natural presence, the birds and blossoms in their seasons and the chromatic tunings of air and weather, pressed upon him as he paced the suburban acreage where his present wife had installed him. His mother had had a nature-lover’s hatred of smoking and drinking—her father had come home drunk and cruel from the tavern—and Allen had relinquished both habits years ago. She didn’t smoke or drink but had loved to eat, and her middle-aged corpulence embarrassed him as well as her. In the hospital, looking back upon her life, she had confessed only one regret, with a fleeting expression of disgust: “I’m sorry I let myself get fat.”

But then, in the sentences that followed, as an excuse, she had described the irresistible apple pie à la mode served in the basement cafeteria of a downtown department store where she had worked for a few Christmases—the delicious crust, the cinnamon on the crust, the creaminess of the vanilla or even fudge-ripple ice cream on top of that. The store had been the classier though smaller of the two major downtown emporiums, both rendered defunct by the rise of suburban malls; inside the revolving doors, gusts of candy-sweet perfume had swamped his youthful senses, and Christmas tinsel shivered everywhere, and carols were chiming from high on the walls, and toward the rear of the first floor, across from the stairway leading down to the clattering, fragrant cafeteria, a lending library had held, each jacket proudly wrapped in cellophane, the new Ellery Queen mystery, the new Thurber collection. Trembling tracks of wire carried money and receipts around the ceiling to an unseen cashier’s office and back again—or was this in the big hardware store in the next block? Were pneumatic tubes used here, spitting out, with a stunning thump and crash, cylinders colorfully padded at both ends with thick felt? His mother would have known; she could have shared with him the vanished texture of this lost world, the world she had brought him to life within, a world of glamorous drugstores, with marble counter tops, and movie houses that were exotic islands of air-conditioning, with paper icicles dripping from the marquee. The entire old downtown that had held such wonders was not just dilapidated but wiped out—replaced by blank-faced buildings holding only the gray minions of government and finance. He wandered a world without features, just grass and sky, as in Brazil’s remotest Mato Grosso, the last of his tribe, silent and hungry.

Hungry—he could not stop eating. After a full dinner, while his wife loaded the dishwasher, he would rummage rather frantically in the breadbox and the cupboards, scarcely conscious of what he was doing, and stuff his mouth with cookies, peanuts, raisins. On weekend mornings, in a strange daze he would find himself in the kitchen, not remembering how he got there, and consume half a bag of potato chips, or a safe-dish of leftover microwaved peas. Food, all the other sirens having grown faint and hoarse with age, now sang to him penetratingly—the edginess of food; the friability; the saltiness or sweetness of it in the ardent moment of first contact with his membranes; the ruminative pulverizing and liquefying and incorporating of it, like an act of memorization or of mathematical comprehension. Eating was a way, his only remaining way, of intersecting with the world. People guessed; his Christmas presents tended to be edible—boxes of giant cashews, of pricey conglomerate nuggets of chocolate, nuts, and caramel—and at dinner parties, he was the one somehow elected to take a second helping, to gratify the hostess. Allen Dow was getting fat. Just five pounds overweight, as he saw it, though he could have lost fifteen without looking thin. Each day proved to be not quite the one in which to eat less. Though he woke to a stomach ache, and vowed moderation, as the sun grew higher the cry from an emptiness within was too sharp, too persistent. As the last of a jar of sugared peanuts, or of a nicely buttered blueberry scone, disappeared into his insides, smothering the suppressed panic there—not so much the fear of death as the sensation that his life was too *small*—he smiled to think that his mother had reached this point at the age of thirty, whereas he was all of sixty. As they tell you in seventh-grade health class, girls develop more rapidly than boys.