# The Black Room

# John Updike

“I don’t *want* to go,” said Lee’s mother, though she had already agreed to go, in the too-bright, teal-blue silk dress that had come out of the cedar closet where it had hung for all the decades in which she had been too fat to wear it. Her weight loss was not a good sign, Lee felt, though as a boy and then as a man and then as a middle-aged man he had hoped for it. Less of a mother, he had thought, would be more—more chic, more manageable. But now that she was in her eighties and her clothes hung loose on her and her skin hung loose above her elbows, he was frightened. He wanted her bulk back.

He tried joking: “It’s the chance of a lifetime.” She didn’t smile, so he tried backing out: “You don’t have to go. I’m the one who’s interested, so I’ll go alone.”

Yet it had been her idea. She had heard that their old house in the city of Alton was being sold; the then-young couple who had bought it, Marine Lieutenant Jessup and his wife, had enlisted in a retirement community and placed the house on the market. Embarrassingly, Lee felt, his mother had phoned the Jessups and explained how much it would mean to her son if he, on one of his monthly visits from New York City, might come by. Neither she nor he had entered the house since that drizzly November day forty-seven years ago when the movers had cleared out their furniture, damaging the cane-back sofa and breaking two plates of Philadelphia blueware in the process. The family, which had numbered five then, climbed into a newly bought secondhand Chevrolet and drove twenty miles in the rain to the unimproved farmhouse that Lee’s mother had settled on as the site of her long-deferred self-fulfillment. She said now, “That Alton house nearly killed me and I swore I’d never set foot in it again.”

“You’ve made your point. Forty-seven years is as good as never. You’ve put the house in its place, Mother.”

“Your grandfather was always convinced that Jessup had slipped Jake Oberholz a fifty, to persuade us to accept the eight thousand.” Lee had heard it all before: Oberholz had been their real-estate agent, and Jessup had been fresh out of the Marines, a quiet war hero, slim and blond and tall in Lee’s memory of him, and in a white dress-uniform. He had seen him once, in the front hall, from the height of a twelve-year-old, while the sale was still being negotiated. The whole thing had gone on over Lee’s head; he could scarcely believe it was happening, this abandonment of the only house he had ever lived in.

“Well, you didn’t want the place,” he pointed out. “Jessup did. Come on. We can’t not go now, after you’ve got us invited. You shouldn’t have set this up if you didn’t want to go.”

“I was trying,” the old woman said primly, “to please my only child.”

They had maneuvered themselves out of the back door of the sandstone farmhouse, and were halfway across the yard to Lee’s BMW. His mother’s car was stored in the barn. Her cardiologist had forbidden her to drive, though she occasionally did, to the 7-Eleven at a crossroads two miles away, “to keep the engine from seizing up,” she said. They walked slowly, her hand heavy on his arm; even a little exertion left her short of breath, though she didn’t stop talking: “I don’t know why you always spite me by loving that house so.”

“I don’t say I love it. I was born there, is all.”

“It was too much house—my father’s vanity made itself a monument the day he bought it. He bought it when I was off at college, without even telling me. I never could feel at home there. Neither could Mother. We weren’t city people. It nearly killed her, trying to keep it clean, up to city standards. It had a peculiar dust in it, that clung everywhere.”

He had heard this before, too, but its implausibility still made him laugh. “Well, you showed it,” he told her. “You escaped its clutches.”

“I don’t know why you’ve always resented our moving. Honest to goodness, Lee, I added years to all of our lives by getting us out of Alton. The only city person among us was your father.”

“I was just a child, Mother. I was in no position to resent anything. I’m still not.”

But was she right? Had he loved the house in Alton, all these years, just to spite her? It was a long, narrow-faced brick house, on a wider lot than most along the street. In his childhood the bricks had been painted pale yellow and the trim dark green. There was a front porch, a side porch, and an upstairs porch, and the yard had held cherry trees, a walnut tree, a birdbath, a bed of lilies of the valley, and a vegetable garden that his grandfather turned with a shovel every spring.

“I can take it or leave it, seeing the house,” he said. “This trip wasn’t my idea, remember.” They were skimming along a highway lined with ranch houses; it had been a winding asphalt road the first time he had travelled it, with an occasional dirt lane leading off to a barn, a silo, and a square stone farmhouse just like theirs.

“I had to, seeing as it was our last chance. They were always inviting us, those first years. On every Christmas card. Then they stopped asking. I thought I’d get through life without ever having to see those rooms again. I like your idea, of you going in alone. You could drop me off at Weisbach’s Drug Store for half an hour.”

His mother’s fanciful distortions and quick little visions had always struck him as a higher form of truth. This trip *was* his idea, somehow; she had read his mind and set it up to please him. He said, truthfully, “Without you, Mother, it’d be no fun.”

“I could sit at the counter and have one of those sundaes. You have to say this for Luther Weisbach—he didn’t stint on the butterscotch.”

“Mother, I don’t think it’s still called Weisbach’s. And drugstores don’t have counters any more.”

The road surface wore a moist shine. It was a soft late-September day, the sunshine golden and the towering trees misty. A barn whose red side had said JESUS SAVES in fading letters year after year was suddenly gone, replaced by a Japanese-style building with wide eaves and staggered shingles—a golf-course clubhouse.

“You weren’t such a child,” his mother said, picking up another thread of her mental web. “You were thirteen. If we’d stayed there you’d still think of yourself as a child. That house made everybody in it childish. As long as I was in that house, I was my parents’ daughter.”

The Depression had thrown them all together—his parents and his mother’s parents. The Crash took his grandfather’s savings, and then his father had been laid off from his job in Pittsburgh. Lee had been born into this wealth of disappointments and had been a happy child. All four adults had conspired to make him happy, as if his happiness might yet reverse their fortunes. They had scraped by, with various jobs. The war had come along and helped. With their modest war profits, his mother had finagled the change of houses, moving them to what his father had called “the sticks.” Now, with his grandparents and father long dead, the sticks—raspberry canes and sumac and wild grape and poison ivy—were moving ever closer to the little farmhouse, as his mother’s strength waned. For decades she had wielded the clippers and scythe like a man, and had ridden the power mower hour after hour, bouncing in widening circles around the lawn. Now reluctant teenagers did the mowing, when they could be recruited from the countryside; Pennsylvania held fewer and fewer farm children, accustomed to physical work. His mother’s house, stuck in the past, smelled of dust balls and mouse droppings. The plumbing and heating, brand-new in 1946, had become antique. Yet she insisted, “That Alton house was never healthy. The coal furnace made a gas that sat on my chest whenever I’d lie down.”

Lee laughed again, for they had reached the far end of his old street, and he was heading home.

This neck of Alton had a small-town quality, many of the houses free-standing on lots adorned by hydrangeas and rhododendron bushes, and even the semi-detached houses solid and well kept up. The vacant lots of Lee’s childhood had been filled in, and the street had been widened at the expense of a row of sycamores whose blotched bark and buttony seedpods had seemed oddly toylike to him, as if God were an invisible playmate. On the uphill side, a tall row of semi-detacheds held fascinating little guttered spaces between them, passageways sexual in their intimacy, with a thin slice of sky at the top. Even widened, Franklin Street from its far end had a contained, narrowing look. In the side of Lee’s vision his mother’s hand fumbled in her black pocketbook and darted one of her nitroglycerin pills into her mouth. “Don’t be nervous,” he told her.

Over her teal-blue dress she had donned, though the day was unseasonably warm, an old-fashioned wool overcoat in a broad plaid, with a fox-fur collar. Her thick head of chestnut hair had been one of her youthful glories; Lee remembered from childhood the witchy, dripping tent her hair made after she had washed it, a towel worn over her shoulders as it dried. Now this hair, gone in the last decade from iron-gray to a gauzy white, let pink scalp show through, and she wore indoors and out a round knit cap on her head, bigger than a beanie but not quite a beret. Her ankles and feet were so swollen she could no longer squeeze her feet into anything but running shoes; she had chosen a vivid, several-striped pattern. From the days when she had been a young beauty and her father had still had money, she retained a taste for attention-getting clothes. Lee tried to repress his embarrassment, as he had when he was an adolescent and she was a vivacious, overweight, countrified woman, her sun-reddened hands and forearms scored by the scratches of raspberry and greenbrier thorns. “Why would I be nervous?” she asked sharply.

It was he who was nervous. Parking the car, he rubbed the tires against the curb, which the street improvement had left higher and whiter than it had been. Getting out of the car, he felt eerily tall in this setting of his earliest days. The houses across the street, with their trees and telephone poles, presented the same silhouettes, though on this side the sunshine struck down strangely through the absence of sycamores, and the Jessups had taken away the waist-high box hedge that had shielded the front yard from sidewalk traffic. Sidewalk traffic, of course, was a thing of the past; it belonged to the Depression, to door-to-door salesmen walking on foot and people running to catch clanging trolley cars. The pale new curb of the widened street was so high that his mother couldn’t get the door of the BMW to swing open, and he had to repark it, his stomach nervously pinching. Entering this house again, this paradise at the far end of his life, seemed a trespass.

The brick front walk, which had had little ant cities of mounds like coffee grains between the bricks, had become glaring concrete. The distance across the porch to the front door, which he remembered as large and full of peril—for the porch had thick brick walls that might conceal a crouching beast—had dwindled to two strides. The door, with its letterslot lid saying MAIL and its bevelled-glass window, had been replaced by an opaque panelled door, though the leaded sidelights and tinted fanlight holding the house number, 303, remained above. Jessup, who greeted them inside the door, had grown shorter than Lee, but his hair was still close-cropped and blond, and his figure had a military trimness. Mrs. Jessup, whom Lee had never met, was like a bride on a wedding cake, perfect of her kind, though grown plump and blue-haired. She had dimples, and bifocals, and cheeks as round and bright as if rouged. The Jessups greeted Lee cordially, but saved their real ardor of welcome for his mother, whose shrunken figure seemed in the corner of his vision to be engulfed by their courteous bodies. His eyes were darting about, desperate to light on something familiar and cherished.

“What a *nice* idea this is,” said the former Marine. “I must say, you folks have waited to the very last minute. As soon as we get a buyer, we’re out of here, as the young people say.”

“Well, my father used to tell me, ‘Don’t be so impatient, Elsie. Good things keep.’ ”

Her charm—Lee tended to forget that about his mother. When pulled out of the sticks and put to the test of social encounter, she rose to the challenge. “I love your lemon-yellow wallpaper,” she told the elderly couple. “This was always such a dark hall, with the two big gloomy radiators. I never knew why there had to be *two;* on winter days it was the warmest spot in the house. Lee used to lie on the floor, drawing, where we all had to step over him.”

The flattened texture and faded plum color of the carpet that had lain at the edge of his drawing pad returned to his mind’s eye out of the past, along with the diagonal beams of dust-laden light that came in the sun-parlor windows and broke on the wide oak arms of his grandfather’s favorite chair. The sun parlor was gone, swallowed up by Jessup’s office; he had used the GI Bill to become an attorney. Lee was tempted to open the shut office door on the chance that his grandfather was still sitting there, in the slices of sunlight, his head tilted back in that ostentatiously resigned way he had, and his hands, frail and brown as onionskin, folded across the buttons of his gray sweater as he waited for the mailman or the afternoon paperboy to bring him word of the world. His grandfather had exuded an air of graceful defeat that the boy had found endearing.

“Everything is so *right*,” his mother was saying. “When we were here, everything was slightly *wrong*.”

Lee knew, as the Jessups did not, that his mother distrusted rightness, in this bourgeois sense—felt herself rather above it, in fact. As her breathy voice flirted behind him, in and out of the Jessups’ catering voices, he felt freed to walk ahead, looking for traces of the house he remembered. There were almost none. Renovations had come in and washed everything away, even the old touches of elegance like the elaborate spindle-work headers above the wide archways into the living room, and the fluted wooden pillars that framed the archways. The ceilings, plastered in tidily overlapping semicircles, seemed lower. Instead of their old Oriental rug with its mazy border and the cane-back settee and its companion chairs—their horsehair cushions holding that musty, oystery scent country parlors have—there was fat modern furniture in pastel shades surrounding a glass table supported on wrought-iron scrolls. A semi-tropical Floridian luxuriance had crept into Pennsylvania interiors since the Forties. Where their Christmas tree had annually stood, between the two front windows from which Lee would watch, beyond the porch wall, the coal sliding thunderously down the chute that telescoped out from the truck, now stood a blond-stained wood cabinet holding souvenirs of the Jessups’ foreign travels—beaten copper, carved ivory, Mexican pottery, New Mexican turquoise.

The “piano room” held not the old upright Chickering but a large-screen television set and a cabinet of hi-fi components. Down the dark hall that had once seemed perilously shadowy and long, beside the flight of stairs his grandfather had quaintly called “the wooden hill,” the dining room quickly appeared, minus the Tiffany lampshade that had hung from the center of the ceiling, and the mahogany-veneered sideboard with the cloudy mirror, and the stained-pine corner cabinet that had held their good china, including the Philadelphia blueware whose broken plates had been one of the costs of the move from Alton. In this room, on a strip of wooden floor between the figured rug and the doors that led out to the side porch, Lee to entertain himself would bowl, using rubber Disney dolls—Mickey Mouse and Pluto, Donald Duck and Ferdinand—for tenpins. Now wall-to-wall carpet covered the space. Staring down, trying to picture the concealed floorboards, he was overtaken for a moment by the taste of that distant time, a musty sensation, bland as a stale malt ball, of being sheltered in a low cave while great things were going on above him, in the clangorous heights where the Second World War merged with Walt Disney’s busy kingdom. Beneath the notice of all the grown-up furor he would set up his battered rubber creatures and bowl them down again with a lopsided softball, whose stitches, he seemed to remember, were not real but a bas-relief imitation.

The house was quickly traversed; next came the kitchen, which he had not expected to find unchanged. Even the plumbing had been moved about, so that in place of the slate sink with its long-nosed copper faucets now bulked an electric stove with a black-faced microwave, and where the old gas stove had poured forth X-patterns of blue flame a modern stainless-steel sink had appeared, the dishwasher and trash compactor installed to one side. Rose-colored cabinets matched a giant double-doored refrigerator; the little walnut icebox, the blackened tin toaster that had sat on a gas burner like a tiny house full of chinks, the food-grinder that had clamped to the edge of the kitchen table were so thoroughly, irrevocably carted away by the years that Lee could scarcely imagine the little boy who used to reach up on tiptoe to the red-and-white recipe box on top of the icebox. The family kept its meagre cash in the tin recipe box, and he was entitled, at schoolday lunchtimes, to buy a Tastykake to eat on the walk back to elementary school.

His mother’s voice was carrying on behind him. “So Mr. Oberholz came to us and said, ‘It was an eight-thousand-dollar house when you bought it in 1922, and it’s still an eight-thousand-dollar house in 1945.’ My dad, he was such a trusting man, he believed him, just like he believed all those shysters who unloaded their stock off on him before the Crash, but me, I had a bit of the devil in me, I guess, I couldn’t believe it hadn’t gone up in value *at all* in twenty years. Now I read in the paper that you’re asking over two hundred thousand. I still have friends in town who send me such clippings in the mail. If you can call them friends.”

Lee tried to intervene. “Mother, it’s only been since the nineteen-fifties that people expect to make money off of real estate. And now they’re losing it again.”

But Mrs. Jessup could defend herself. Putting herself on a first-name basis, she said, “Elsie, we really couldn’t have paid a penny more. Even so, we went into debt, and Hank was working nights as a watchman as well as going to law school. Those were hard times.” Her blush of indignation was pretty.

“It’s been a kind house to us,” Jessup said, in a conciliatory lawyer’s voice, putting the done deal behind them. “We raised three beautiful children in it.”

Back in the dining room, Lee at last found a survival of the house of his own childhood: the windows. They were still tall, gaunt four-pane windows, and the panes were still the imperfect glass whose waveriness and oval bubbles had fascinated him as a child. He would stand and move his head and watch the lines of their neighbors’ house warp and undulate, as in the underwater scenes of *Pinocchio*. The oval bubbles, like immortal microbes, were still there, in the glass, though combination storm windows dulled the outlook, and the neighbors’ house was a different, closer house, filling the vacant lot where Lee had played fungo and kick-the-can with Doug Rhoda and Shorty Heister and the neighborhood girls, who lived in the sexy row houses across the street and whose parents would call them home from their rickety high porches in the summer twilights, as the fireflies came out.

The tour of the downstairs completed, Mrs. Jessup politely asked, in the narrow hallway, “Would you like to see the upstairs? We moved some walls about, to accommodate the children. I doubt you would recognize much.”

“I’d love to see it,” Lee said, when his mother was silent. Upstairs had been the enchanted realm of sleep, of days home sick in bed, of his parents in their underwear, of his grandparents muttering behind their closed door. Ultimate realities had resided upstairs.

The party was dividing along gender lines. Mrs. Jessup conducted her own conversation with Lee’s mother. “Elsie, there was something I’ve always wanted to ask you about,” she said, drawing close enough to touch the older woman on the shoulder, next to the prickly fox-fur. “When we moved in, there were two little rooms out back, above the kitchen, looking into the back yard.”

“Yes. The one on the right was Lee’s room, looking toward the vacant lot.”

“And the other, the one with only the one window, was painted black.”

“Oh no! Was it really?”

“Yes, and we couldn’t figure out what it had been used for. Had it been a darkroom, maybe, for your husband’s photography?”

“Norman never took a picture in his life. I was the family photographer, with this old Kodak that had lost its viewfinder. You paced off the yards and hoped for the best.”

Mrs. Jessup persisted. “It must have been for storage, then.”

“Yes, we kept a few things in it. Mother’s ironing board, her Singer sewing machine, an old sleigh-bed headboard and footboard that had been *her* mother’s … But I don’t remember that room as *black*.”

“Well, it was. We were quite struck and puzzled, I remember, at the time.”

Lee sensed an impasse. His stomach was starting to chafe. He asked, “Mother, do you want to come upstairs?”

“No,” she said. “No I don’t.”

“Really? Why would that be?” He darted a look at her; her face, fallen into creases with her loss of weight, seemed pale, stricken by some internal development. He felt in his own insides the effort with which she kept up the charm. She gasped before she spoke.

“You all go,” she said, “and I’ll spare myself the stairs and just sit and admire how bright and cheerful the Jessups have made our dreary old living room.”

“Then I’ll stay right with you,” Mrs. Jessup said, with the firmness of a warder. “We’ll have a good chat. Shall I make us a cup of tea?”

For much of his life, Lee had seen other people, attracted by his mother, draw close; but in the end, only he could follow her twists and turns. Sometimes he wondered if his personality hadn’t been so exactly conformed to his mother’s that it made a poor fit with anyone else’s.

“Tea? To tell the truth, I never developed the taste for tea. I was a coffee drinker, up to a dozen cups a day, and now the doctors say I shouldn’t drink even decaf. Coffee and ice cream and apple pie were my sins, and now I’m paying for them. Norman always used to say to me, ‘You’re the last person in the world, Elsie, who thinks there’s such a thing as a free lunch.’ ”

While Mrs. Jessup coped with this pronouncement, her husband took Lee upstairs. In passing, Jessup touched the newel post, with its round knob. “Bet you recognize this.”

“Yes.” But in fact the knob, with its equator of beaded grooves, had seemed an unpleasant presence to little Lee—an eyeless head, a possible Martian like those in that radio play that had frightened everybody in New Jersey.

“I asked that it be left,” Jessup said, with what seemed shy pride, “though Dorothy thought it didn’t go with the new décor.”

At the head of the main stairs there had been a windowless landing where they would gather, sitting on the steps, during air-raid drills, while Lee’s father strode around the darkened neighborhood in his air-raid warden’s armband and helmet. One set of three steps had led to a hall that went past Grampy and Grammy’s bedroom to the guest bedroom, which overlooked the street. Another short set had led the other way, to his parents’ bedroom and his own, and a third had gone up to the communal bathroom. All this awkward architecture had been smoothed into a parade of bright bedrooms to shelter, in the Jessups’ prime, the couple and three growing children. Lee’s grandparents’ room, which even through a closed door had smelled powerfully to his childish nostrils of old shoes and old bodies and mothballed blankets and bottles of liniment, had become the Jessups’ daughter’s room. A kind of shrine, it still held her school pennants, a poster of a bare-armed Mick Jagger, her frilly bed coverlet, and framed photographs of herself as a child, as an adolescent with braces, as a graduating senior, as a bride in white, and as a mother in slacks posing with two small children in what Jessup told Lee was a back yard in Colorado, where she lived with her husband, an Air Force pilot. “She inherited your military gene,” Lee observed.

“Born ten years later, she’d have been a pilot herself,” her father boasted.

The guest bedroom, where his mother would go for her naps when she needed to get away from them all, and where Lee, when sick, would recline in a litter of picture books and cough-drop boxes, had been expanded outward, into a massive master bedroom, swallowing the hall window, whose sill had always held a potted geranium. At the back of the house, other walls had vanished as his little room with its stained and varnished wainscoting had been merged with the mysterious one next to it, and from his parents’ bedroom had been carved a spacious bathroom that the Jessup sons could share. The boys’ bedrooms still held traces of extensive electronic equipment. In this unfamiliar space Lee found himself remembering how the whole sleepy house would resound with the noise when his grandfather, first thing in the morning, shook down the ashes in the furnace, and shovelled in fresh coal.

“Well,” he said to his host, by way of leavetaking, and in response to a certain air of self-congratulation, “I’d say you spent your forty-seven years here very well.”

“It was a happy house for us.”

“Good. For me, too.” No longer child and young veteran, they had become two aged men who had loved the same object. One had won and one had lost, but now the winner was surrendering the prize also. Time takes all. Lee looked around once more and couldn’t find himself, even in the shape of the windows. A silent hurricane had swept through this house, leaving nothing undamaged. His parents’ bedroom had opened onto a side porch just like the one below, with jigsawed balusters holding up the wooden, green-painted rail. The present railing was ornamental ironwork, as if they were in New Orleans.

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Downstairs, a glance told Lee that his mother was in trouble. She had slumped to one side on the sofa, and was resting a bony, veiny hand upon her chest, as if to quiet something within. Yet her face still bore a listening smile, as Mrs. Jessup finished saying, presumably of a son, “Now he’s in corporate finance in Wilmington, with this wonderful Bank of Delaware.”

“Mother,” Lee announced, by way of rescue, “you missed a grand tour up there. They knocked out the wall between the guest bedroom and the hall and made a master suite! Grammy and Grampy’s old room is full of pennants and teddy bears. Their daughter married a pilot in Colorado.”

“Dorothy was saying,” she responded, “that she agreed with me—this house … is hard on its women.” She spoke in little hurried skips, struggling for breath. When she stood, she staggered one sideways step, and leaned heavily on Lee in heading to the front door. She had never taken off her plaid overcoat.

“Can’t we get you anything?” Mrs. Jessup asked, her eyes and cheeks yet brighter with alarm. “Even a glass of water?”

“You’ve done … everything,” was the answer. “I get … these spells, where my chest … doesn’t seem to have any *depth*.” She laughed in self-deprecation. “It was lovely of you to let us … see what all you’ve done. You’ve done … wonders.”

The porch, as Lee escorted his mother across it, seemed as wide as he remembered it from childhood. The concrete walk glared under their shoes as they shuffled to the curb. She allowed herself to be folded into the passenger’s seat, and lifted a withered hand and waved it in response to the Jessups’ cheery, worried farewells. As Lee drove the car down the street, in the direction in which he would walk to elementary school eating his Tastykake, past Weisbach’s Drug Store, she struggled to breathe, in intense, sharp sips; her body shook as if some invisible predator had it by the nape of the neck.

Lee asked, “Shall we go home or straight to the Alton Hospital?”

“Home.” The syllable seemed all she could manage.

As he made the turn to circle the block, her hand in the side of his vision fed a pill into her mouth.

“That house,” she explained. “I needed … to get out.”

“Just like always.” Her retreating into ill health irritated him. His old grudge remained. “Well,” he announced, putting on the blinker to signal the next right turn, which would head them out of the city, “you won’t have to see that house ever again.”

“That room … was never black.”

“What?”

“That’s what upset me. That room was never black. Why would anybody in their right mind … paint a room black?”

“That’s what they said they were wondering.”

“They imagined it. The walls had old cream-colored paper … with blue florets … and the wainscoting was pine, stained walnut. Mother used to do her sewing in that room, before her eyesight went.”

“They couldn’t have just imagined it, they must have had some basis, Mother. She was very definite.”

“Yes, about everything. Maybe it was a joke. That’s how those Alton people are, Lee. That’s the way they were when I was a girl. Sly. Always poking fun. It made me feel bad. It made me feel crazy. That they would think … we would have had a black room.”

“How’s your chest?”

“A little better. Don’t you remember how the room was?”

“I don’t remember ever looking in, Mother. That room frightened me. When I would go to sleep in my bed, I remember, I would turn to face that wall so that if something came through the wall I could grab it before it grabbed me.”

“Oh my. And here we all thought you were such a happy child.”

As Alton fell away behind them and the country roads began to sing beneath their tires, her spirits lifted. She helped him make their dinner, directing the cooking from her chair at the kitchen table, where she sat with all her pill bottles—a miniature city—at her elbow. He fried a big slice of ham, boiled up some frozen succotash, and baked two potatoes in the crusty old oven: the kind of meal she used to devour, with a heaping of ice cream to top it off. She ate half, trying to please him, and he finished up her plate, which made him feel unpleasantly full. During the night, he heard her moving about in her room, clearing her throat and gasping, on the other side of the wall. It was still dark, before dawn. He thought of going in to her, but fell back asleep instead.

In the morning, the smell of coffee rose up the stairs. It was like his grandfather stirring the furnace: life. His mother was downstairs ahead of him, in her quilted purple bathrobe, with a tent of white hair worn loose over her shoulders. Light from the back door shone through her thinning, floating hair. “Isn’t coffee verboten?” he asked.

“Not to you, yet. I had a cup myself. I don’t know why that woman offering me tea made me so mad.”

“You were determined something would,” he told her, “no matter how nice they tried to be.”

“They were nice,” she said tonelessly.

He had to leave right after breakfast, since it was three hours back to New York City and he had promised to take his younger daughter to her riding lesson in Central Park, while his wife went to a matinee of *Jelly’s Last Jam*. His mother came outside with him and shuffled along as far as the sandstone walk allowed. She was dressed in wool-lined suede slippers, and the uncut lawn was lank and whitened by dew. Beyond the house, the sumac was turning red here and there, and the poplars showed a yellow tinge. Fall was on the way, with winter behind. What would she do, alone? They should have discussed it last night, after dinner, instead of watching television: *Golden Girls*, followed by *Empty Nest*. She had become an unreality addict.

“Wouldn’t you like it,” Lee asked, “if we could get somebody to stay in the house with you this winter?”

“The Jessups, maybe,” she said. “They could call this their retirement home. They could clean out all my cobwebs and put in wall-to-wall polyester.”

In the low morning sunshine, the eastward wall of the stone farmhouse glowed as if from within. Lee was conscious of the neglected lawn, the wild raspberry canes, the towering trees beyond as a tightening net of interwoven nature. The house seemed perilously small. So did his mother. From the concerned look on her face, he knew she was viewing him as her child, having one of his nervous stomach cramps. “It’s a real problem, Mother,” he weakly insisted. “It worries me. You shouldn’t be alone.”

She had taken to wearing her glasses less and less. The absence of frames gave her face a startled, naked look, even now, when she assumed her teasing expression. She asked, “Why would you want to kill me, making me live with somebody else? I just barely survived living with your father all those years.”

He was content to be dismissed, yet couldn’t make himself move off the sandstone walk, the ten yards or so to where his car was parked. This September day was beginning with high clouds, a few ribs of cirrus arched in the stratospheric cold. Some birds made a sudden flurry of noise in the old, half-dead pear tree. There was a buzzing in the air, a constant eating. The truck traffic on the Jersey Turnpike would be at its peak. “Think about it. About, you know, more ideal arrangements.”

“Lee, this house *is* my ideal arrangement. Now, don’t make Jenny late for her lesson. Girls love horses. Maybe that was why I resented Dad’s moving us to town—it meant I couldn’t ride any more. Here. Let’s see if I can make it to the road.” Holding on to his arm, she kicked off her slippers and stepped off the last stone barefoot. The icy shock of the wet grass sprang a delighted laugh: life. She hobbled with him to the side of his car. Her blue-veined feet were puffy on top, like a baby’s feet. “Now, I’ll be fine,” she recited, when they had stopped walking and she could get her breath. “I’ll take my pills and try to eat more and get some strength back. I’m sorry I let those city folk get the better of me yesterday. I had wanted so *not* to act up.”

She lifted her weightless, onionskin hand from his arm and found a footing on the uneven lawn which held her upright while he got into his BMW and started the engine. Seen through the open car window, in the morning light, her face looked defenseless around the eyes, the delicate skin owlish. “I’m sorry,” she said solemnly, “I let myself be so frightened.”

“You mean of the bla—?”

She was startlingly quick to touch his arm again, to stop his mouth. “Don’t even *say* it!”