# The Dark

# John Updike

THE DARK, he discovered, was mottled; was a luminous collage of patches of almost-color that became, as his open eyes grew at home, almost ectoplasmically bright. Objects became lunar panels let into the air that darkness had given flat substance to. Walls dull in day glowed. Yet he was not comforted by the general pallor of the dark, its unexpected transparence; rather, he lay there waiting, godlessly praying, for those visitations of positive light that were hurled, unannounced, through the windows by the headlights of automobiles pausing and passing outside. Some were slits, erect as sentinels standing guard before beginning to slide, helplessly, across a corner, diagonally warping, up onto the ceiling, accelerating, and away. Others were yellowish rectangles, scored with panes, windows themselves, but watery, streaked, as if the apparition silently posed on a blank interior wall were being in some manner lashed from without by a golden hurricane.

He wondered if all these visitations were caused by automobiles; for some of them appeared and disappeared without any accompaniment of motor noises below, and others seemed projected from an angle much higher than that of the street. Perhaps the upstairs lamps in neighboring homes penetrated the atmosphere within his bedroom. But it was a quiet neighborhood, and he imagined himself to be, night after night, the last person awake. Yet it was a rare hour, even from two o’clock on, when the darkness in which he lay was untouched; sooner or later, with a stroking motion like a finger passing across velvet, there would occur one of those intrusions of light which his heart would greet with wild grateful beating, for he had come to see in them his only companions, guards, and redeemers.

Sounds served in a much paler way—the drone of an unseen car vanishing at a point his mind’s eye located beyond the Baptist church; the snatched breath and renewed surge of a truck shifting gears on the hill; the pained squeak, chuffing shuffle, and comic toot of a late commuting train clumsily threading the same old rusty needle; the high vibration of an airplane like a piece of fuzz caught in the sky’s throat. These evidences of a universe of activity and life extending beyond him did not bring the same liberating assurance as those glowing rectangles delivered like letters through the slots in his room. The stir, whimper, or cough coming from the bedroom of one or another of his children had a contrary effect, of his consciousness touching a boundary, an abrasive rim. And in the breathing of his wife beside him a tight limit seemed reached. The blind, moist motor of her oblivious breathing seemed to follow the track of a circular running of which he was the vortex, sinking lower and lower in the wrinkled bed until he was lifted to another plane by the appearance, long delayed, on his walls of an angel, linear and serene, of light stolen from another world.

While waiting, he discovered the dark to be green in color, a green so low-keyed that only eyes made supernaturally alert could have sensed it, a thoroughly dirtied green in which he managed to detect, under opaque integuments of ambiguity, a general pledge of hope. Hope for his specific case he had long given up. It seemed a childhood ago when he had moved, a grown man, through a life of large rooms, with white-painted moldings and blowing curtains, whose walls each gave abundantly, in the form of open doorways and flung-back French windows, into other rooms—a mansion without visible end. In one of the rooms he had been stricken with a pang of unease. Still king of space, he had moved to dismiss the unease and the door handle had rattled, stuck. The curtains had stopped blowing. Behind him, the sashes and archways sealed shut. Still, it was merely a question of holding one’s breath and finding a key. If the door was accidentally locked—had locked itself—there was certainly a key. For a lock without a key is a monstrosity, and while he knew, in a remote way, that monstrosities exist, he also knew there were many more rooms; he had glimpsed them waiting with their white-painted and polished corners, their invisible breeze of light. Doctors airily agreed; but then their expressions fled one way—cherubic, smiling—while their words fled another, and became unutterable, leaving him facing the blankness where the division had occurred. He tapped his pockets. They were empty. He stooped to pick the lock with his fingernails, and it shrank from his touch, became a formless bump, a bubble, and sank into the wood. The door became a smooth and solid wall. There was nothing left for him but to hope that the impenetrability of walls was somehow an illusion. His nightly vigil investigated this possibility. His discoveries, of the varied texture of the dark, its relenting phosphorescence, above all its hospitality to vivid and benign incursions of light, seemed at moments to confirm his hope. At other moments, by other lights, his vigil seemed an absurd toy supplied by cowardice to entertain his last months.

He had months and not years to live. This was the fact. By measuring with his mind (which seemed to hover some distance from his brain) the intensity of certain sensations obliquely received, he could locate, via a sort of triangulation, his symptoms in space: a patch of strangeness beneath the left rib, an inflexible limitation in his lungs, a sickly-sweet languor in his ankles, which his mind’s eye, as he lay stretched out in bed, located just this side of the town wharf. But space interested him only as the silver on the back of the mirror of time. It was in time, that utterly polished surface, that he searched for his reflection, which was black, but thin-lipped and otherwise familiar. He wondered why the difference between months and years should be qualitative when mere quantities were concerned, and his struggle to make “month” a variant of “year” reminded him of, from his deepest past, his efforts to remove a shoehorn from between his heel and shoe, where with childish clumsiness he had wedged it. How frighteningly tight the jam had seemed! How feeble and small he must have been!

He did not much revisit the past. His inner space, the space of his mind, seemed as alien as the space of his body. His father’s hands, his mother’s tears, his sister’s voice shrilling across an itchy lawn, the rolls of dust beneath his bed that might, just might, be poisonous caterpillars—these glints only frightened him with the depth of the darkness in which they were all but smothered. He had forgotten almost everything. Everything in his life had been ordinary except its termination. His “life.” Considered as a finite noun, his life seemed vastly unequal to the infinitude of death. The preposterous inequality almost made a ledge where his hope could grip; but the unconscious sighing of his wife’s sagging mouth dragged it down. Faithlessly she lay beside him in the arms of her survival. Her unheeding sleep deserved only dull anger and was not dreadful like the sleep of his children, whose dream-sprung coughs and cries seemed to line the mouth of death with teeth. The sudden shortness of his life seemed to testify to the greed of those he had loved. He should have been shocked by his indifference to them; he should have grubbed the root of this coldness from his brain. But introspection, like memory, sickened him with its steep perspectives—afflicted him with the nausea of futile concentration, as if he were picking a melting lock. He was not interested in his brain but in his soul, his soul, that outward simplicity embodied in the shards and diagonal panes of light that wheeled around his room when a car smoothly passed in the street below.

From three o’clock on, the traffic was thin. As if his isolation had turned him into God, he blessed, with stately wordlessness, whatever errant teenager or returning carouser relieved the stillness of the town. Then, toward four, all such visits ceased. There was a quietness. Unwanted images began to impinge on the dark: a pulpy many-legged spider was offered wriggling to him on a fork. His teeth ached to think of biting, of chewing, its eyes, its tiny intermeshing fluid-bearing parts, its fur.…

It was time to imagine the hand.

He, who since infancy had slept best on his stomach, could now endure lying only on his back. He wished his lids, even if they were closed, to be pelted and bathed by whatever eddies of light animated the room. As these eddies died, and the erosion of sleeplessness began to carve his consciousness fantastically, he had taken to conceiving of himself as lying in a giant hand, his head on the fingertips and his legs in the crease of the palm. He did not picture the hand with total clarity, denied it nails and hair, and with idle rationality supposed it was an echo from Sunday school, some old-fashioned print; nevertheless, the hand was so real to him that he would stealthily double his pillow to lift his head higher and thereby fit himself better to the curve of the great fingers. The hand seemed to hold him at some height, but he had no fear of falling nor any sense of display, of being gazed at, as a mother gazes at the baby secure in her arms. Rather, this giant hand seemed something owed him, a basis upon which had been drawn the contract of his conception, and it had the same extensive, impersonal life as the pieces of light that had populated, before the town went utterly still, the walls of his room.

Now the phosphor of these walls took on a blueness, as if the yellowness of the green tinge of the darkness were being distilled from it. Still safe in the hand, he dared turn, with cunning gradualness, and lie on his side and touch with his knees the underside of his wife’s thighs, which her bunched nightie had bared. Her intermittently restless sleep usually resolved into a fetal position facing away from him; and in a parallel position—ready at any nauseous influx of terror to return to his back—he delicately settled himself, keeping the soft touch of her flesh at his knees as a mooring. His eyes had closed. Experimentally he opened them, and a kind of gnashing, a blatancy, at the leafy window, which he now faced, led him to close them again. A rusty brown creaking, comfortable and antique, passed along his body, merging with the birdsong that had commenced beyond the window like the melodious friction of a machine of green and squeaking wood.

He smiled at himself, having for an instant imagined that he was adjusting his stiff arms around a massive thumb beside his face.

Comfort ebbed from the position; his wife irritably stirred and broke the mooring. Carefully, as gingerly as if his body were an assemblage of components any one of which might deflect his parabolic course, he moved to lie on his stomach, pressing himself on the darkness beneath him, as if in wrestling, upon some weary foe.

Panic jerked his dry lids open. He looked backward, past his shoulder, at the pattern of patches that had kept watch with him. A chair, with clothes tossed upon it, had begun to be a chair, distinctly forward from the wall. The air, he saw, was being visited by another invader, a light unlike the others, entering not obliquely but frontally, upright, methodically, less by stealth than like a hired presence, like a fine powder very slowly exploding, scouring the white walls of their moss of illusion, polishing objects into islands. He felt in this arrival relief from his vigil and knew, his chest loosening rapidly, that in a finite time he would trickle through the fingers of the hand; he would slip, blissfully, into oblivion, as a fold is smoothed from a width of black silk.