

## The Guestroom

The guestroom didn't fit with the rest of the house. In the rest of the house there were burgundy oriental rugs, pewter plates on built-in shelves, a fireplace in a high-ceilinged foyer, walls hung with impressionist still-life oils painted by a great aunt who had to flee the Nazis in Berlin in the thirties. The guestroom, in contrast, was yellow, artless, almost completely square (twelve feet a side), and Berber-carpeted wall-to-wall. Tacked onto the southwest corner of the house in 1961, the guestroom was furnished with only a squarish sofa-bed, a pressed-wood slatted nightstand, and a lamp. To get there, you had go past the kitchen and walk through a hallway you would never otherwise use.

The guestroom was where Robert and I boxed. We set Mom's kitchen timer on the nightstand, turned it to three minutes, prepared ourselves for a few seconds in opposite corners, and then went at it, fists raised, while the timer ticked down. We didn't have gloves and knew about boxing only what could be gleaned by watching Muhammad Ali and the occasional middleweight round they chose to show on ABC's Wide World of Sports. We liked the idea of boxing, but we weren't really comfortable with hitting each other in the face. We would do it — hit each other in the face, that is — but we wouldn't do it very hard. Hitting in the stomach was a different story; that we could do hard. Robert was two and a half years older, and he always got the best of our bouts. I might be able to last a round or two, but eventually, after having enough of the pounding, I would fall and stay down for the count.

We also used the guestroom the day Robert turned ten. He got as a present a Panasonic tape recorder, black and silver, with a retractable handle. Carrying it was like having a shoebox for a piece of luggage. The 'record' button was red and to make it work you had to press down on it and the 'play' button at exactly the same time. We used the tape recorder to make cassettes of records, which meant putting it next to the record-player, carefully placing the needle on the record, and then remaining as quiet as possible while the song played. Listening later you could often

make out the sound of a dishwasher, a dog barking, or a telephone ringing followed by Mom's muffled voice.

The tape recorder came with a manufacturer's cassette. One side was blank, but the other had a song on it. Robert inserted the cassette and pressed 'play.' The music was surprisingly, astoundingly, impossibly jazzy. We were in the living room at the time, but we both knew immediately what we had to do. We raced through the foyer, through the dining room, through the kitchen, down the hallway, and to the guestroom. We turned the volume on the tape recorder all the way up, and then danced like maniacs, bouncing off the yellow walls and the Berber carpet. When the three-minute song was over we hit rewind and played it again. When Mom told us to turn it down, we closed the door, hit rewind, did it once more. We might have continued like that for hours had I not, in my dancing abandon, managed to throw my hand across my own eye and scratch the cornea. That won me a trip to the emergency room and an eye patch for a week.

On one side of the guestroom sofa-bed was the night table. The other side was pushed almost to the wall. Almost, but not quite. There was an eighteen-inch gap, presumably so Mom could slide in to make the bed. That eighteen inches was my best hiding place. The slant of the sofa arm and the angle from the doorway were such that a person poking his head in would think he was seeing the entire room but wouldn't be able to see me. The room was spare enough that it wouldn't occur to the person to walk all the way and look more closely.

One Saturday afternoon in May I squeezed into the space between sofa and wall and fell asleep. I wasn't escaping from anything. I wasn't playing hide-and-seek. It was just a cozy place to go, it smelled of clean fabric, fresh linen, and wool, and I was sleepy.

When I woke up, I padded out of the guestroom down the hallway to the kitchen. I walked through the family room, through the dining room, through the foyer, through the living room. No one was home. The front door was open. The car was in the driveway. The living room lights were on. But no one was home. I climbed the stairs and checked the bedrooms. No one.

I continued to walk around the house, looking. It was the first time I had been in the house by myself. The late afternoon sun was low and strong. I could see rays of yellow light entering the windows and crossing the rooms. Worlds of particles moved in the rays. Every object in the house was lit. Every object cast its own shadow. I was alone with everything.

Some time later I walked out onto the front porch. The next door neighbor saw me. "Oh my god there you are!" she said. "Your parents have been frantic!" She grabbed my hand and yanked me in my socks down the road to the elementary school parking lot. Mom was there. She rushed over and gave me a very hard hug. Dad and Robert were located and they came to the parking lot too. A big fuss was made.

Earlier in the afternoon, apparently, Mom and Dad had one of their colossal fights. When it ended, they realized they didn't know where I was. They searched the house, but I was nowhere to be found. They called my friends in the neighborhood. They looked in the alleyway behind the house, went to the playground at the end of the block. They thought I had been so traumatized by their fighting that I had run away. In my socks.

I told them vaguely that I had been taking a nap, but they didn't believe me. They were convinced that I had run away because of their fighting. I felt guilty about the guilt I was causing them. I might have been able to salvage the situation by explaining in more precise detail where I had been. But I didn't want to give away my hiding place, and I didn't want to give away the time I had been in the afternoon-sun-lit house alone with everything. Even the part of me that *did* want to tell them what I had been doing did not know how to start. It made perfect sense to me, but trying to explain it would be really weird, and maybe would, well, not get me in trouble exactly, but create one of those situations when Dad was confused/perturbed/impatient, and David would get mad at me for putting Dad in that mood and so would find some reason to beat me up. So I kept things vague, and they continued to believe that the incident was caused by my being traumatized by their fighting. The more I denied it, the more convinced they became that I had been traumatized and was now too scared to admit it.

After Mom and Dad divorced and I went away to college, Mom rented out the guestroom to help pay the mortgage. When I came home winter break my sophomore year, occupying the room was a blond 26-year-old aerobics instructor who was both perky and mean. She had been there since September and treated me as though I was the visitor. She also took it as obvious that I had an adolescent wet-dream crush on her. One night between Christmas and New Year's I got back late after being out with friends. I went to the kitchen for a snack. While I was eating a bowl of cereal at the kitchen table, sounds started coming from the guestroom that were so similar to the sounds from a sex scene in a movie that I found it hard to believe they were authentic. Those sounds were not something I wanted to hear. But at the same time this was *my* house, *my* home, and I was damned if I was going to be made to feel like I had to scurry away up the stairs and eat my bowl of cereal from my knees while sitting on the bed. I finished my cereal just as the guestroom's so-big-it-must-have-been-fake climax occurred. I placed the bowl in the sink and began to exit the kitchen. At the moment I passed the entrance to the hallway, the door to the guestroom opened and the aerobics instructor stepped out to go to the bathroom. Our eyes met for a split second. Her expression made perfectly clear what she was thinking: I had been peeping, and now that the show was over, I was creeping away to be with myself in my bedroom. As she made her way to the bathroom I heard her say over her shoulder into the guestroom, "That *Jonah* was *listening*."

For the rest of break I stayed as far away from the southwest part of the house as I could. I went back to college and never set foot in the house again. Six months later it caught fire, Mom couldn't afford the repairs, and it was sold.