Where is Here?

Joyce Carol Oates

For years they had lived without incident in their house in a quiet residential neighborhood when, one November evening at dusk, the doorbell rang, and the father went to answer it, and there on his doorstep stood a man he had never seen before. The stranger apologized for disturbing him at what was probably the dinner hour and explained that he‘d once lived in the house-“I mean, I was a child in this house“-and since he was in the city on business, he thought he would drop by. He had not seen the house since January 1949, when he‘d been 11 years old and his widowed mother had sold it and moved away but, he said, he thought of it often, dreamt of it often, and never more powerfully than in recent months. The father said, “Would you like to come inside for a few minutes and look around?“ The stranger hesitated, then said shakily, “I think I‘ll just poke around outside for a while, if you don‘t mind. That might be sufficient.“ He was in his late 40s, the father‘s approximate age. He wore a dark suit, conservatively cut; he was hatless, with thin silver-tipped neatly combed hair; a plain, sober, intelligent face and frowning eyes. The father, reserved by nature, but genial and even gregarious when taken unaware, said amiably, “Of course we don‘t mind. But I‘m afraid many things have changed since 1949.“

So, in the chill, damp, deepening dusk, the stranger wandered around the property while the mother set the dining-room table and the father peered covertly out the window. The children were upstairs in their rooms. “Where is he now?“ the mother asked. “He just went into the garage,“ the father said. “The garage! What does he want in there?“ the mother said uneasily. “Maybe you‘d better go out there with him.“

“He wouldn‘t want anyone with him,“ the father said. He moved stealthily to another window, peering through the curtains. A moment passed in silence.

The mother, paused in the act of setting down plates, neatly folded napkins, and stainless steel cutlery, said impatiently, “And where is he now? I don‘t like this.“

The father said, “Now he‘s coming out of the garage,“ and stepped back hastily from the window.

“Is he going now?“ the mother asked. “I wish I‘d answered the door.“

The father watched for a moment in silence then said, “He‘s headed into the back yard.“

“Doing what?“ the mother asked.
“Not doing anything, just walking,“ the father said. “He seems to have a slight limp.“

“Is he an older man?“ the mother asked.

“I didn‘t notice,“ the father confessed.

“Isn‘t that just like you!“ the mother said. She went on worriedly, “He could be anyone, after all. Any kind of thief, or mentally disturbed person, or even murderer. Ringing our doorbell like that with no warning and you don‘t even know what he looks like!“

The father had moved to another window and stood quietly watching, his cheek pressed against the glass. “He‘s gone down to the old swings. I hope he won‘t sit in one of them, for memory‘s sake, and try to swing-the posts are rotted almost through.“ The mother drew breath to speak but sighed instead, as if a powerful current of feeling had surged through her. The father was saying, “Is it possible he remembers those swings from his childhood? I can‘t believe they‘re actually that old.“

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The mother said vaguely, “They were old when we bought the house.“

The father said, “But we‘re talking about 40 years or more, and that‘s a long time.“

The mother sighed again, involuntarily, “Poor man!“ she murmured. She was standing before her table but no longer seeing it. In her hand were objects-forks, knives, spoons-she could not have named. She said, “We can‘t bar the door against him. That would be cruel.“

The father said, “What? No one has barred any door against anyone.“

“Put yourself in his place,“ the mother said.

“He told me he didn‘t want to come inside,“ the father said.

“Oh-isn‘t that just like you!“ the mother said in exasperation. Without a further word she went to the back door and called out for the stranger to come inside, if he wanted, when he was through with looking around outside.

They introduced themselves rather shyly, giving names, and forgetting names, in the confusion of the moment. The stranger‘s handshake was cool and damp and tentative. He was smiling hard, blinking moisture from his eyes; it was clear that entering his childhood home was enormously exciting yet intimidating to him. Repeatedly he said, “It‘s so nice of you to invite me in-I truly hate to disturb you-I‘m really so grateful, and so-“ But the perfect word eluded him. As he spoke his eyes darted about the kitchen almost like eyes out of control. He stood in an odd stiff posture, hands gripping the lapels of his suit as if he meant to crush them. The mother, meaning to break the awkward silence, spoke warmly of their satisfaction with the house and the neighborhood, and the father concurred, but the stranger listened only politely, and continued to stare, and stare hard. Finally he said that the kitchen had been so changed-“so modernized“-he almost didn‘t recognize it. The floor tile, the size of the windows, something about the position of the cupboards-all were different. But the sink was in the same place of course; and the refrigerator and stove; and the door leading down to the basement-“That is the door leading down to the basement, isn‘t it?“ He spoke strangely, staring at the door. For a moment it appeared he might ask to be shown the basement, but the moment passed, fortunately-this was not a part of their house the father and mother would have been comfortable showing to a stranger.

Finally, making an effort to smile, the stranger said, “Your kitchen is so-pleasant.“ He paused. For a moment it seemed he had nothing further to say. Then, “A-controlled sort of place. My mother-when we lived here-“ His words trailed off into a dreamy silence, and the mother and father glanced at each other with carefully neutral expressions.

On the window sill above the sink were several lushly blooming African violet plants in ceramic pots, and these the stranger made a show of admiring. Impulsively he leaned over to sniff the flowers-“Lovely!“-though African violets have no smell. As if embarrassed, he said, “Mother too had plants on this window sill but I don‘t recall them ever blooming.“

The mother said tactfully, “Oh, they were probably the kind that don‘t bloom-like ivy.“

In the next room, the dining room, the stranger appeared to be even more deeply moved. For some time he stood staring, wordless. With fastidious slowness he turned on his heel, blinking, and frowning, and tugging at his

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lower lip in a rough gesture that must have hurt. Finally, as if remembering the presence of his hosts, and the necessity for some display of civility, the stranger expressed his admiration for the attractiveness of the room, and its coziness. He'd remembered it as cavernous, with a ceiling twice as high. "And dark most of the time," he said wonderingly. "Dark by day, dark by night." The mother turned the lights of the little brass chandelier to their fullest; shadows were dispersed like ragged ghosts and the cut-glass fruit bowl at the center of the table glowed like an exquisite multifaceted jewel. The stranger exclaimed in surprise. He'd extracted a handkerchief from his pocket and was dabbing carefully at his face, where beads of perspiration shone. He said, as if thinking aloud, still wonderingly, "My father was a unique man. Everyone who knew him admired him. He sat here," he said, gingerly touching the chair that was in fact the father's chair, at one end of the table. "And Mother sat there," he said, merely pointing. "I don't recall my own place or my sister's, but I suppose it doesn't matter. I see you have four place settings, Mrs.-? Two children, I suppose?" "A boy 11 and a girl 13," the mother said. The stranger stared not at her but at the table, smiling. "And so too we were-I mean, there were two of us: my sister and me."

The mother said, as if not knowing what else to say, "Are you-close?"

The stranger shrugged, distractedly rather than rudely, and moved on to the living room.

This room, cozily lit as well, was the most carefully furnished room in the house. Deep-piled wall-to-wall carpeting in hunter green, cheerful chintz drapes, a sofa and matching chairs in nubby heather-green, framed reproductions of classic works of art, a gleaming gilt-framed mirror over the fireplace: Wasn't the living room impressive as a display in a furniture store? But the stranger said nothing at first. Indeed, his eyes narrowed sharply as if he were confronted with a disagreeable spectacle. He whispered, "Here too! Here too!"

He went to the fireplace, walking, now, with a decided limp; he drew his fingers with excruciating slowness along the mantle as if testing its materiality. For some time he merely stood, and stared, and listened. He tapped a section of wall with his knuckles-"There used to be a large water stain here, like a shadow."

"Was there?" murmured the father out of politeness, and "Was there!" murmured the mother. Of course, neither had ever seen a water stain there.

Then, noticing the window seat, the stranger uttered a soft surprised cry, and went to sit in it. He appeared delighted: hugging his knees like a child trying to make himself smaller. "This was one of my happy places!-at least when father wasn't home. I'd hide away here for hours, reading, daydreaming, staring out the window! Sometimes Mother would join me, if she was in the mood, and we'd plot together-oh, all sorts of fantastical things!" The stranger remained sitting in the window seat for so long, tears shining in his eyes, that the father and mother almost feared he'd forgotten them. He was stroking the velvet fabric of the cushioned seat, gropingly touching the leaded window panes. Wordlessly, the father and mother exchanged a glance: Who was this man, and how could they tactfully get rid of him? The father made a face signaling impatience and the mother shook her head without seeming to move it. For they couldn't be rude to a guest in their house.

The stranger was saying in a slow, dazed voice, "It all comes back to me now. How could I have forgotten! Mother used to read to me, and tell me stories, and ask me riddles I couldn't answer. 'What creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at midday, three legs in the evening?' 'What is round, and flat, measuring mere inches in one direction, and infinity in the other?' 'Out of what does our life arise?' 'Out of what does our consciousness arise?' 'Why are we here?' 'Where is here?' "

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The father and mother were perplexed by these strange words and hardly knew how to respond. The mother said uncertainly, “Our daughter used to like to sit there too, when she was younger. It is a lovely place.“

The father said with surprising passion, “I hate riddles-they‘re moronic some of the time and obscure the rest of the time.“ He spoke with such uncharacteristic rudeness the mother looked at him in surprise.

Hurriedly, she said, “Is your mother still living, Mr.-?“

“Oh, no. Not at all,“ the stranger said, rising abruptly from the window seat, and looking at the mother as if she had said something mildly preposterous.

“I‘m sorry,“ the mother said.

“Please don‘t be,“ the stranger said. “We‘ve all been dead-they‘ve all been dead-a long time.“

The stranger‘s cheeks were deeply flushed as if with anger and his breath was quickened and audible.

The visit might have ended at this point, but so clearly did the stranger expect to continue on upstairs, so purposefully, indeed almost defiantly, did he limp his way to the stairs neither the father nor the mother knew how to dissuade him. It was as if a force of nature, benign at the outset, now uncontrollable, had swept its way into their house! The mother followed after him saying nervously, “I‘m not sure what condition the rooms are in, upstairs. The children‘s rooms especially-“ The stranger muttered that he did not care in the slightest about the condition of the household and continued on up without a backward glance.

The father, his face burning with resentment and his heart accelerating as if in preparation for combat, had no choice but to follow the stranger and the mother up the stairs. He was flexing and unflexing his fingers as if to rid them of stiffness.

On the landing, the stranger halted abruptly to examine a stained-glass fanlight-“My God, I haven‘t thought of this in years!“ He spoke excitedly of how, on tiptoe, he used to stand and peek out through the diamonds of colored glass-red, blue, green, golden-yellow-seeing with amazement the world outside so altered. “After such a lesson it‘s hard to take the world on its own terms, isn‘t it?“ he asked.

The father asked, annoyed, “On what terms should it be taken, then?“

The stranger replied, regarding him levelly, with a just perceptible degree of disdain, “Why, none at all.“

It was the son‘s room-by coincidence, the stranger‘s old room-the stranger most wanted to see. Other rooms on the second floor, the “master“ bedroom in particular, he decidedly did not want to see. Speaking of it, his mouth twitched as if he had been offered something repulsive to eat.

The mother hurried on ahead to warn the boy to straighten up his room a bit. No one had expected a visitor this evening! “So you have two children,“ the stranger murmured, looking at the father with a small quizzical smile. “Why?“

The father stared at him as if he hadn‘t heard correctly. “Why?" he asked.

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“Yes. Why?“ the stranger repeated. They looked at each other for a long strained moment, then the stranger said quickly, “But you love them-of course.“

The father controlled his temper and said, biting off his words, “Of course.“

“Of course, of course,“ the stranger murmured, tugging at his necktie and loosening his collar, “otherwise it would all come to an end.“ The two men were of approximately the same height but the father was heavier in the shoulders and torso; his hair had thinned more severely so that the scalp of the crown was exposed, flushed, damp with perspiration, sullenly alight.

With a stiff avuncular formality the stranger shook the son‘s hand. “So this is your room, now! So you live here, now?“ he murmured, as if the fact were an astonishment. Not used to shaking hands, the boy was stricken with shyness and cast his eyes down. The stranger limped past him, staring. “The same!-the same!-walls, ceiling, floor-window-“ He drew his fingers slowly along the window sill; around the frame; rapped the glass, as if, again, testing materiality; stooped to look outside-but it was night, and nothing but his reflection bobbed in the glass, ghostly and insubstantial. He groped against the walls, he opened the closet door before the mother could protest, he sat heavily on the boy‘s bed, the springs creaking beneath him. He was panting, red-faced, dazed. “And the ceiling overhead,“ he whispered. He nodded slowly and repeatedly, smiling. “And the floor beneath. That is what is.“

He took out his handkerchief again and fastidiously wiped his face. He made a visible effort to compose himself.

The father, in the doorway, cleared his throat and said, “I‘m afraid it is getting late-it‘s almost six.“

The mother said, “Oh, yes, I‘m afraid-I‘m afraid it is getting late. There‘s dinner, and the children have their homework-“

The stranger got to his feet. At his full height he stood for a precarious moment swaying, as if the blood had drained from his head and he was in danger of fainting. But he steadied himself with a hand against the slanted dormer ceiling. He said, “Oh yes!-I know!-I‘ve disturbed you terribly!-you‘ve been so kind.“ It seemed, surely, as if the stranger must leave now, but, as chance had it, he happened to spy on the boy‘s desk an opened mathematics textbook and several smudged sheets of paper, and impulsively offered to show the boy a mathematical riddle-“You can take it to school tomorrow and surprise your teacher!“

So, out of dutiful politeness, the son sat down at his desk and the stranger leaned familiarly over him, demonstrating adroitly with a ruler and a pencil how “what we call ‘infinity‘ can be contained within a small geometrical figure on a sheet of paper. First you draw a square; then you draw a triangle to fit inside the square; then you draw a second triangle, and a third, and a fourth, each to fit inside the square, but without their point coinciding, and as you continue-here, son, I‘ll show you-give me your hand, and I‘ll show you-the border of the triangles‘ common outline gets more complex and measures larger, and larger-and soon you‘ll need a magnifying glass to see the details, and then you‘ll need a microscope, and so on and so forth, forever, laying triangles neatly down to fit inside the original square without their points coinciding!“ The stranger spoke with increasing fervor; spittle gleamed in the corners of his mouth. The son stared at the geometrical shapes rapidly materializing on the sheet of paper before him with no seeming comprehension but with a rapt staring fascination as if he dared not look away.

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After several minutes of this, the father came abruptly forward and dropped his hand on the stranger‘s shoulder. “The visit is over,“ he said calmly. It was the first time since they‘d shaken hands that the two men had touched, and the touch had a galvanic effect upon the stranger: He dropped ruler and pencil at once, froze in his stooped posture, burst into frightened tears.

Now the visit truly was over; the stranger, at last, was leaving, having wiped away his tears and made a stoical effort to compose himself; but on the doorstep, to the father‘s astonishment, he made a final, preposterous appeal- he wanted to see the basement. “Just to sit on the stairs? In the dark!"

“I wasn‘t the one who opened the door to that man in the first place,“ the mother said, coming up behind the father and touching his arm. Without seeming to know what he did, the father violently jerked his arm and thrust her away.

“Shut up. We‘ll forget it,“ he said.

“But-“

“We‘ll forget it.“

The mother entered the kitchen walking slowly as if she‘d been struck a blow. In fact, a bruise the size of a pear would have materialized on her forearm by morning. When she reached out to steady herself, she misjudged the distance of the doorframe-or did the doorframe recede an inch or two?-and nearly lost her balance.

In the kitchen, the lights were dim and an odor of sourish smoke, subtle but unmistakable, made her nostrils pinch.

She slammed the oven door. Grabbed a pair of potholders with insulated linings. “I wasn‘t the one, God damn you,“ she said, panting, “-and you know it.“