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Eden Close

Written by Anita Shreve

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Eden Close

Anita Shreve



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For John

ONE

The air lay as heavy as water in the square dark rooms of the farmhouse. The house was still, sounds indistinct and muffled, as if heard through cloth. Upstairs, in the boy's room, the clock over the desk ticked away the minutes just past midnight. In the next room, where the boy's parents slept, there was the soft rattle of an old fan, moving the thick air from outside the house to inside and over his parents' bodies. As they had done nearly every hot night that summer, they had offered the fan to the boy, but the boy, aware that summer for the first time of his parents' age, had refused to take it from them.

In the house, far from town, Andy slept on his back in his bed. He slept badly, his lips lightly parted, his body smothered by the August night. A damp sheet, loose from its moorings, covered his chest. The boy's chest was bony then, without the muscles that would come later, and he

had an older boy's summer growth, as if he'd sprouted too fast and had lost the grace of childhood. He was tall now, so tall that he towered over his parents, and his unfamiliar limbs, splayed under and out from the sheet, gave his body a lanky awkwardness, even in his sleep. His skin had an August tan and had all but lost the marks of adolescence. His hair, dark brown and thick and slightly too long, against his father's wishes, was wet at the sides and the back with the heat. He turned, pulling the sheet with him, as if to say, despite his dreams, *OK, now, enough of this*.

The boy's father, in the next room, sleeping on his stomach in a sleeveless undershirt and boxer shorts, moved a hand near his ear to make a mosquito go away. His mother lay beside his father, on her back, like the boy. She had thrown off the sheet entirely, but her body was clothed in her pink summer pajamas. She had curlers at the sides and top of her head. The mosquito, discouraged by the father, alighted on her thigh, and too late, in her sleep, she moved her leg against the air.

Beyond the screen in the boy's room, there was only darkness. The darkness lay over the town and along the road that led from town, and it lay over the two farmhouses that were set two miles along that road like an afterthought, with only each other for company. The two houses were only seventy feet apart, the one facing the road, the other, his own, down a short dirt drive, pointing north, overlooking an abandoned cornfield. Indeed, the darkness had come that day from the north, blanketing that part of the state where the town was and where the boy had been born. In the afternoon, clouds the color of dust had moved along the sky like thick batting, diffusing the sun until it was only heat and blotting out the moon

and the shooting stars of August in the evening. The blackness folded the heat back down upon itself and pushed it through the screens and into the rooms where the boy and his parents slept.

Later they would all know and be able to say that it was ten minutes past twelve when the sounds started. It was the boy who woke first, seconds before his parents. He heard a woman cry out, and he thought, as he swam up through his sodden sleep, that it might be his mother. But when he was awake, he knew that the sound was outside, in the darkness past the screen. The boy pushed the sheet from his chest as if the sheet kept him from understanding the sound outside his window. Perhaps, too, he heard then, through the wall, his father or his mother, sitting up. Like him, suddenly alert.

The second sound was a hoarse cry, nearly a shout, from a man, and with that there was immediately the frightened squeal of another female voice, that of a child still, like himself. He heard his father's feet on the floor, the rustle of trousers, a zipper – then his mother's muffled voice, anxious, questioning. The boy moved down to the foot of the bed, where the window was. On his hands and knees, he looked out at the night, waiting for the voices to explain themselves.

There were two shots, the boy and his parents would say later. Two shots fast upon each other, so that they sounded, in the silent night of midsummer, like one explosion shattering the air. The boy knelt frozen, his hands on the sill. He knelt that way for the seconds of silence that followed the explosion, until he heard the loud voice of his father telling his mother not to move. And then calling his son's name through the wall. *Andy*. He could hear his father open the door of the closet where he kept

the rifle on a shelf. Then his own door opened. His father, in his sleeveless undershirt, rifle in hand, said, *Get away from the window*. The boy heard his father's footsteps running on the stairs and the soft whir as his father dialed the phone in the hallway downstairs.

Unable to move as his father had commanded, the boy stared at the darkness outside the screen. The last sound began then. It was reedy, a high-pitched wail, rising at first like a tendril of smoke into the sky – a female voice, though nearly inhuman, gathering momentum as it rose. He imagined a woman opening her mouth, her voice rising from her in a thin, quivering stream. The boy heard his father stop dialing, listen and replace the receiver. The keening rose, sliced through the night. The boy shivered with the sound and backed away from the window. The cat downstairs jumped onto the kitchen table and started to hiss. Crows and summer birds, awakened by the unearthly cries, or perhaps by the gunshots, began to chatter and caw. And through the wall, the boy heard his mother say, as if in comprehension, *Oh God, oh Jesus*.

Andrew wakes from the dream in the same bed in which he was a boy and is disoriented. The dream lingers, vivid and heavy, pulling him down, causing him to swim in confusion between the night of the gunshots, when he was seventeen, and this night, the night of his mother's funeral, when he is thirty-six and sleeping alone in his parents' house for the first time in his life. He makes the dream linger longer than it might, enjoying the sensation of diving deeply into the boy's body and thoughts, hearing with the boy's ears as he has not been able to do in nineteen years, enjoying even the fear – the ability to feel that kind of fear chasing along the spine.

Andy. He hears again the exact timbre of his father's voice, and of his mother's – muffled, murmuring, anxious. There are details in the dream he hasn't remembered in nineteen years, and he thinks (briefly, because he does not want thoughts to interrupt or block his way back down into the dream) that the dream has worked like hypnosis, giving back sight and hearing that have been lost to him. In his waking thoughts he hasn't been able to see, as he can now, his father as a younger man, the shoulders still muscled under the sleeveless vest, the thin open weave of the undershirt, nearly like gauze, so unlike the thick cotton T-shirts he himself wears now. The midnight stubble on his father's face, the hard stomach lying flat beneath the undershirt. In his waking thoughts he can make his father appear only as he was shortly before he died – clean shaven, the thickened waist straining at the belt, the chest sunken, as though the center, the power, of the body had slipped. Most of the images he now has of his father's youth come from photographs, so that his father is frozen in this pose or that, that expression or this, but has no life, no voice – just as his own son's early years seem locked forever in the photographs and movies Martha, his ex-wife, has taken. His son is seven now, but Andrew cannot reliably remember how he sounded or what he said at two or at four.

He rolls over in the bed, hoping to sink deeper into sleep, to keep the dream alive. He can feel a door closing slowly. The dream is slipping away, and he is losing the feeling of being a boy, but the door hasn't entirely shut: he can still make out some of the details. He had forgotten, but can see now, the way the clouds came on that afternoon, a sour color filling the sky, turning trees and skin in the early evening light a pale, sickish yellow. And he

can hear again the excited sounds of the birds just after midnight, when there should have been silence. He had forgotten the way his father held a gun, pointed straight down along the side of his leg, like a brace. And that his mother wore curlers to bed. And he had forgotten (indeed, how could anyone have retained the precise sound?) the terrible pitch of the woman's cries. At any point in the intervening years, he could have said that, yes, there was the sound of a woman crying in grief or in horror, but he couldn't have described it. Occasionally he would, when he was younger and more eager to impress, tell the story to a new acquaintance or to a woman, giving his childhood its only bit of glamour: *The man next door was murdered when I was seventeen. His daughter was raped*. But he hasn't, until the dream, been able to hear the sound.

But is the dream accurate? he wonders. Have bits been added for dramatic effect or for some psychological payoff? No, he thinks (his thoughts intruding, coming faster, taking precedence over his sleep), the dream is true in the details that are there – nothing that is there is altered (except, perhaps, the part about the mosquito, which must have bitten *him* just now and worked its way into the dream) – but like edited copy, the dream has left out certain messy or seemingly irrelevant complications.

He had forgotten, but remembers now – and this was not part of the dream – the way the heat and the dirty air raised tempers that day, like an irritant chafing the skin, causing his parents, earlier in the evening, to speak in uncharacteristically querulous tones. He remembers that night at dinner – a cold, disappointing meal of ham slices and potato salad (it was too hot to cook, or even to eat) – that when his mother once again offered him the fan, there was an edge to her voice as if she knew in advance

that he would decline it and was tired of the minor triumph of her son's refusal and of the larger implication of her son's generosity. And he remembers that after the meal, she rose in silence to get the ice cream from the freezer and put the half-empty carton on the table. The dessert looked to Andy as if it would taste like the cardboard it came in, and he didn't want it despite the heat, despite his usual thirst for sweets. He got up from the table and went out the screen door, letting it bang a little harder than usual, hunching his shoulders slightly against the possibility that his father would swing open the door in anger at his son's sudden sullenness.

But his father didn't come to the door, and Andy walked on down the dirt and gravel drive to the road, his hands in his pockets, thinking that soon he would go away, to Massachusetts, to school. He reached the road and the Closes' house. It, like his own, was a simple, nearly too spare farmhouse of white clapboards. Decades ago, the two houses had been set in a farmer's family compound at right angles to each other, with the back stoops the nearest point of contact, for two brothers to call to each other, or for a mother to watch over her new daughter-in-law. Now, though they shared a common drive, the families were not related, except in that way that two families, living far from town, might come to weave their lives together. Indeed, a passerby, cruising along the straight road from town, would know, at a glance, that the two families were not related. The first house, close to the road, though swathed in lush overgrown vegetation, particularly a profusion of blue hydrangeas in August, was the more derelict of the two. There was always peeling paint, a roof that needed mending, a shutter fallen in a storm. The house behind, facing north, Andy's own house, as if

to disassociate itself from the careless house out front, was expertly if humbly manicured, its own hydrangea bushes trimmed neatly to size, its surrounding lawns cut and fertilized with discipline.

Mrs Close worked nights then, as a nurse at the county hospital, and their car, a black Buick, was not in the driveway. Andy thought, if indeed he thought of it at all, that she'd taken the car and not the bus to work. (Later – hours, days later? – Andy would know that this impression was mistaken. He would be told, or would overhear, that Mr Close, thinking to escape the heat, had driven his wife to work and then taken the car to the movies. And when his wife's shift was over, he brought her home just minutes after midnight.)

Andy might have wondered then if Eden was at home with her father or was out. He was not able to say later if he saw lights on in the house or not, or if he did, in what rooms the lights were. He tried to explain to the police that he passed that house, looked at that house, a dozen, twenty times a day, every day of his life, so that he could not say for sure if the lights he saw in the living room or the upstairs bathroom were on precisely at that moment, or earlier in the evening, when he was taking out the garbage, or on another night entirely when he had passed by his own screen window and had looked out.

He walked to the road and stood there, looking up and down. He had no plans for the night. He wore a white T-shirt and dungaree shorts and was letting his hair grow, despite his father's sharp comments, long enough for college. The road was flat as far as he could see in either direction. That time of night, after dinner, there were few cars on the road: a family in a station wagon going out

for ice cream; an older boy, like himself, about to pick up a girl; a grown man escaping the dishes, heading for the package store. Strangers used the road too, passing through from towns and cities he did not know to other towns and cities. And occasionally there might be a trucker who had a night delivery off the highway.

Across the road, in the fading ocher light, were the cornfields of a working farm; the farmhouse lay on another road, parallel to his own. Sometimes Andy saw MacKenzie and his son, Sam, on tractors, working the fields. Sam didn't play sports at school because his father needed him in the afternoons. The drying and brittle cornfields rose like briers for several acres in both directions, lending the two farmhouses on Andy's side of the road even more of a sense of isolation in August than in December. The corn was feed corn for dairy cattle. Andy was glad his own father was not a farmer.

That evening Andy stood there, alone on the road, hearing only a distant barking of a dog, the faint whine far off of a car along a highway, the clatter of dishes in a dishpan, a faucet running in his mother's kitchen. He looked east and south, across the cornfields, as he had been doing for weeks since his acceptance at college had arrived in the mail, thinking of leaving, of getting out, yet afraid, too, of the leaving and of what might lie ahead. Already he had a sense of leaving for good, though when he spoke to his mother, he talked often of his vacations, of Thanksgiving, of returning to teach at the junior college in the county. But he knew, even then, that this wasn't true, that he would return for Thanksgiving and for Christmas and probably for the first summer vacation, but that he would really never come back. That what he was to be lay not behind him in the small rooms of the

farmhouse but across the cornfields he could not, this month, see over.

His mother called to him. He turned. He saw her framed in the screen door, the yellow light of the kitchen behind her. He saw the red smock she wore to cover her heavy breasts and abdomen, the bottom of her shorts cutting into her thighs. And, standing in the road, he saw, too – the vision surprising him – the younger woman she had once been, as though he knew for certain he was leaving all of them. He saw the young woman of the photograph albums she kept on the coffee table – her long thick hair and the white collar of her high school picture; the ivory satin of her wedding dress seen through a blizzard at the church door (his father holding a fur jacket over her shoulders); the dazed expression of sensual pleasure in her eyes as she cradled her infant, himself, in her arms. He always thought of her, in the photographs, as beautiful, and he was startled for a moment to realize – to realize he was *capable* of realizing – that she had no beauty left at all. The subtle color of the once auburn hair was already gone, replaced by short, too bright, reddish curls.

And then, because he was seventeen, he had another realization – one that had possibly been lurking below the surface all along but now became, like many of the insights he was having that summer, a conscious thought: Even though you could love someone as much as he had loved his mother and she him, her only child, you could leave her if you had to. You could even look forward to leaving her.

'Your show is on,' his mother said behind the screen.

He went in then and upstairs to shower, to wash away the smell of gasoline that lingered from his summer job

at the Texaco station. After the shower, he sat downstairs in the living room watching the rest of the TV show with his parents, not because he wanted to (he would have preferred to be alone in his room), but because it had been the family ritual for years to watch one TV show together before bed. He was very conscious that summer of rituals, and he didn't want to break any of them. He knew his parents would soon be lonely without him, and though he sometimes felt himself wanting to begin the separation, he didn't like to think about his mother's face or his father's tight smile after he had gone. There'd been a time, not so long ago, when the family rituals – the elaborate pancake breakfasts on Sunday morning, the deliberate choreography of the holidays, the small triangle of the supper table – had been the highlights of his days and weeks and years.

Yes, he now sees, his father had already taken off his shirt and was wearing only the sleeveless undervest and trousers. His mother fanned herself with a magazine and got up during a commercial to make them all lemonade. (Oddly, near dawn, they all sat around the kitchen table and drank the remaining lemonade together after the police and the ambulances had gone. How like his parents not to think of whiskey or brandy first in a crisis, as he would now – *does* now.) They all went up to bed after the show, shortly past ten o'clock (he remembers having said so to the police), his father winding his watch as he walked up the stairs, as he had nearly every night Andrew could remember; his mother hoisting her weight up the stairs by her grip on the banister, her tread heavy on each riser, short of breath at the top; and himself, as light as air, flying, bounding, sprinting up the stairs, not an obstacle for him as they were for his parents.

Later, after he left home, he liked to imagine that he had looked out of his screen window, while he was waiting for his mother or his father to vacate the single bathroom at the top of the stairs, and had had a thought of Eden that night – had posed a query or had seen a silhouette of her moving across the window. But it was, in retrospect, impossible to know if he'd thought of her that night or that morning, or when he'd gotten off the bus from the Texaco station. Eden had been too much a part of his life – as much a piece of his geography as the hydrangea tree outside his window, whose white puffy blossoms are turning now to salmon as they do at the end of every summer; or as the way his mother looked each morning at breakfast in her bathrobe, nursing her coffee as she stared out the kitchen window, making, he always thought, some kind of peace with the weather and with how the day seemed about to unfold. He had known Eden all her life and most of his, and though he was too young then to be able to say with any confidence precisely how it was he was connected to Eden, he knew that he was troubled, as the days of August moved toward September, about having to leave her behind.

He sees that he has pulled the sheet from the foot of the bed during his dream – during the boyhood fear in the dream? – and it now lies in a damp rough swath across his chest. He brings it to his face and inhales a musty scent; it must be years since anyone has slept in this narrow single bed, he thinks. When he used to visit with his wife and his son, the three of them always slept together in the double bed in the guest room at the opposite end of the hallway – and it was, for him, one of the highlights of those visits, their holding each other in that

soft, lumpy bed. As a general rule, Martha didn't believe in letting Billy sleep with them (the child-care books, she said, insisted it would make the boy too dependent), and so they hadn't, except on these rare and wonderful occasions.

Since he left home – and went to college, got married, fathered a child and separated from that wife and child – his room has evolved in the way the rooms of children do when the children aren't ever coming back. At first his mother kept it unviolated, the pennants and the posters on the walls, his desk neat, with his boyhood books and blotter, the few clothes he didn't take with him to school hanging in the closet. They were still there, he saw last night, as he hung up the charcoal gray suit he'd worn to the funeral; but she had used the closet herself, beginning when he didn't know, for her off-season clothes, if such a formal term could be applied to the oversized gaudy synthetics with orange diamonds, green stripes and pink flowers on the sleeves. She never lost the weight she vowed to lose and favored, right up until her death, large loose blouses that camouflaged her ever-swelling hips and thighs.

On the desk now is her sewing machine, and instead of the old pens and half-used notebooks he used to keep in the right-hand drawer, he found there last night an array of bobbins, fabric scraps and needles. There were other rooms she could have chosen to sew in – the sun room downstairs, where the light was good, or the guest bedroom. Perhaps, though, she wanted an excuse to be in this room, to savor some vestige of her son's presence. Or possibly she simply liked the east light in the early morning, or wished to see the other farmhouse, to reassure herself that she was not entirely alone. He tries to imagine what it must have been like for her to have a

family and have it fall away: his own leaving and never really coming back except as a visitor; his father abandoning her five years ago with a heart attack. It has happened to him too – Martha and Billy have left him – though faster and without the dignity of these natural milestones. And he had not had time to be defined by the family he'd made, as she was, nor to become rooted to a place.

The still, heavy night mocks the dream, teasing it in and out of his consciousness. He wonders if the weather, so similar to that on the night of the shooting, has brought on the dream, or if it is the coincidence of lying alone in this bed. Or is it that he needs to feel his parents young and alive again, and his dream has willingly obliged? It is a mixed blessing, he thinks, to hold your past again for a few moments, as he sometimes feels when he dreams of Martha as she was (as they were together) when they first met. He wakes from these erotic dreams of his wife as if immersed in a warm bath, and then is chilled by those first few hints of reality – a tie flung over a mirror, a briefcase on a bureau, sheets he hasn't washed.

He swings his feet onto the floor and arches his shoulders. His back aches faintly; he isn't used to such a soft bed. And with Billy gone, he seldom exercises now – though his body remains, despite neglect, reasonably lean. He still has his hair too, for which he is grateful. His father, from whom Andrew inherited his thick dark hair – as well as his pale gray eyes – went bald at an early age. Andrew isn't certain, but he thinks his father may have lost his hair by the time he was forty-five.

Beside the bed, on a table, Andrew sees the sleeping pills. Dr Ryder, his mother's doctor, pressed a vial into Andrew's palm after the funeral. He imagines the doctor

with many similar vials, a drawerful perhaps, kept for similar occasions, the gesture like that of a priest with a rosary card, or of a car salesman handing you a calendar as you leave the showroom. But he doesn't want a sleeping pill just now. He feels restless.

Four days earlier, he was in the screening room at the other end of the twenty-seventh floor, watching a videotape of an advertisement for a pain reliever his company manufactures, when Jayne, his secretary, got the call. The videotape had been especially poor, and despite the air-conditioning, he was sweating faintly when he returned to his office. As he walked in, Jayne came to his doorway with her hands clasped uncharacteristically in front of her. 'There's bad news,' she said quietly.

'Billy?' he said immediately, the adrenaline already shooting toward his fingertips.

Jayne shook her head quickly. Andrew slowly let out his breath. He thought he could bear anything except bad news about Billy, who was uncommonly prone to accidents – already a chipped tooth and a broken wrist, a scar over his right eyebrow. And since the child had left his keeping, Andrew's fears for him had increased exponentially. It was like the panic he sometimes had in airplanes.

'I'm so sorry,' said Jayne. 'It's your mother. She had a stroke just after breakfast and died almost immediately. A woman named Mrs Close called to tell you, but I didn't want to break the news to you in the screening room. She says to call her. I have the number.'

Andrew sat down. He remembers that his fingers could no longer hold a pen and that already a certain kind of numbness had set in, a disbelief in the truth of the event.

He wouldn't need the number, he told Jayne. He had known it by heart since he was four, had been taught it in case of an emergency and later had used it to call Eden.

Although that conversation was days ago, Andrew is not sure even now that he has taken it in. The chaos of a funeral creates a blur inside which one can choose to remain. He has felt, alternately, grateful that his mother died so easily and so quickly; saddened that she might, even so, have known of her death, if only for a moment, and may have called out to him, her only son; relieved that he will no longer have to think of his mother as lonely; and horrified that the burden of being utterly alone has finally passed to him. He has no parents now or any family of his own to go home to, to create rituals with.

He walks from room to room upstairs, switching on lights as he walks, naked but for his shorts. The contradictory feelings have come in gulps, unexpectedly assaulting him and then leaving him to move about in the curious kind of peace that tending to business has always offered him. Like a good secretary to himself, he has made lists: lists of people to call and tasks to be completed to get to this day, the day of the funeral, and a long list of chores to accomplish before he can leave the farmhouse and the town. The list contains notes such as *call auctioneer, call real estate agents, do gutters, select mementoes*. He imagines the sorting out, the auctioning off of the furniture, the minor repairs to the house and the arrangements to sell it will take him a week, and he called Martha to say that he will be upstate another seven days. When Martha offered to come to the funeral, Andrew said no, Billy was too young. Their presence, he thought, would distract him. Billy's trusting face and sturdy body would enthrall him as they

always did; with Martha, there would be a tension that would inhibit every movement, so that thinking about his mother at all would be nearly impossible.

He has imagined that in lists there is control, but as he walks from room to room, the house seems about to slip from his grasp. His mother's room, now too bright under the overhead electric light, the room she left at dawn one morning five years ago to find her husband cold as tiles on the bathroom floor, the room she then slept in alone, is a labyrinth of snares and complications. There are only so many boxes of things Andrew can rescue from his and his parents' past to take back with him to his apartment in the city. And he sees at once that unless he hardens himself or designs a selection system, he might spend an entire day just in here.

Should he, for instance, take the quilt his mother made when he was ten – a year of her labor (he can recall it clearly) each night after supper, the basket of pieces beside her, her plump fingers nimble with a needle? What will he do with it? He has no wife to give it to, no closet big enough to store it, for it is a massive thing: it kept his parents warm even on the bleakest January nights.

And what of the oak chest of keepsakes at the foot of their bed, things his own mother saved from her mother, and doubtless things that his grandmother saved from her own mother's house? Such a process of distillation, like the corridors of endlessly repeated, though smaller, images in two mirrors; and such a burden, he thinks, these cartons filled with the leavings of lives gone before you. Will Billy one day open drawers in his father's apartment (depressing thought! Will Andrew now progress no farther in his domestic life than his expensive, cheerless condo?), taking objects that seem to contain some essence of his father,

or of his own past, and bring them back to his own drawers and closets in Greenwich or Santa Fe?

Andrew picks up the watch his father wore and wound every night going up the stairs to bed. He knows he will take this, a watch his father inherited from his own father, but what of the Omega lying beside it on his father's bureau – the surface of the bureau undisturbed but for dusting? The Omega was a gift to his father when he left the dairy at his retirement. Andrew did not come to the retirement dinner – there'd been a critical business trip, a trip Andrew has always regretted making – and he doesn't know if his father ever even wore the Omega or if he would want it saved.

Andrew's father was plant foreman when he retired. But for most of the forty years he spent at the dairy, he drove a truck. (At his mother's insistence, the more accurate title 'milkman' was seldom used in the house.) Andy was always asleep when his father left for work (at a punishing three forty-five in the morning), but when he returned from school, the truck would be there, and if he had a friend with him, they would clamber up into it with its bright green and red Miller Dairy sign, competing for the privilege of sitting on the high burnished leather seat and placing their small hands on the oversized steering wheel, the stem of which came all the way from the floor. Andrew remembers his father's gray overalls with the red embroidered script on the pocket, and the way, in winter, his father would wear so many layers underneath for warmth that he looked nearly stuffed. It wasn't until Andrew went to college and the boys around him spoke of their families that he first thought of himself as a WASP. But so humble were his father's circumstances (and, in truth, the circumstances of all his father's ancestors, most

poor farmers) that Andrew wondered for a time if there might not be such a category as failed WASP. Andrew remembers vividly the afternoon his father came home with the news that he'd been promoted to foreman at the plant, releasing him from his position as a driver. He is not sure he ever saw his mother quite so jubilant – the way she kept kissing his father and throwing her arms around him and laughing, as if it were another era and she'd won the lottery.

He sits on the edge of the bed. He wonders who made the bed, for it was here that his mother was found. He assumes it must have been Mrs Close, who came to his mother after the phone call. ('Your mother called Edith Close at about eight this morning and said she had a terrific pain in her head,' Dr Ryder revealed in his hoarse, authoritative voice on the phone the night Andrew arrived. 'By the time Edith got dressed and went over, your mother had already passed away. She found her upstairs. It was a massive stroke, mercifully quick. Be glad for that. But you watch yourself, Andy, both your parents dying of cardiovascular diseases in their sixties; you watch your diet.')

As he sits on the bed, he thinks that a marriage seen when you're a parent too, an adult, is a different thing than the one seen from boyhood. He wonders if his parents were happy together, if they slept touching or apart (he doesn't really know; they were always private and silent in this room, and he has no memory, as other children do, as Eden said she did, of mysterious and unexplained parental sounds) and whether they had ceased to make love. His parents were older than most when he was born; his mother was thirty-one. She had, she said, nearly given up on a baby before he came, and there was a time when

this caused him to imagine that he was adopted, like Eden, despite the fact he looks so like his father that he can't, even today, go into town without a man or woman there saying it: *the image of your father.* Still, as children can be, he was obsessed for months (or perhaps it was only weeks) by this notion of adoption; so much so that he conceived the idea that the two families had gravitated to the two farmhouses set apart from the town because there was about them this unnatural link.

He looks at the marriage bed and sees, suddenly and unbidden, the image of a woman rolling over, turning her back on the man. But it is not his mother he is seeing; it is his wife. He doesn't want to think of Martha just now. He gets up and shuts off the light.

The brandy, kept for company, is in the cabinet with the meat grinder over the fridge. He pours himself a generous amount in a jelly glass. The kitchen, he reflects, sitting on a white-painted wooden chair, is nearly unchanged since he was a boy. And as it did then, it gives the appearance of having been scrubbed raw. It is a farmhouse kitchen, 'modernized' during the thirties, with a green-speckled linoleum floor, a white porcelain sink and stove and kitchen table, all with rounded edges. There are painted surfaces everywhere – the white tongue-and-groove boards of the walls, the pale green of the old Hoosier cabinet, the four unmatched white chairs at the table. He thinks about the kitchen in the house in Saddle River he bought with Martha, where Martha and Billy now live, and about the shiny, stainless-steel refrigerator in that kitchen and the expensive quarry tile on the floor and how remarkably cold – literally cold – the floor is there.

When he arrived the evening of the day his mother

died – by car, having driven the 270 miles north from the city – and walked in the back door (as did everyone who entered the house), the kitchen appeared as it does now; there were no leavings of a half-eaten breakfast, as he had feared to see. Edith Close again, he imagines, silently officious, cleaning up the clutter of death.

Thinking of Edith Close, he remembers again, and abruptly, the terrible sound in his dream of a woman crying. He swirls the golden brandy in the jelly glass and recalls the sequence of events, an exact sequence he has not thought of for years. His father again picked up the phone and dialed the police. Then he went alone through the kitchen, out the door and up the drive, his rifle tense along the side of his leg. Andy heard his father's unhurried footsteps on the gravel and the heavy patter of his mother running down the stairs. Andy pulled on his shorts and went downstairs to be with his mother, partially out of a desire to protect her, primarily out of a need to be in her presence. She was standing at the screen door, peering out at the darkness. Despite the heat, she had put on a robe (pink seersucker with lace at the edges, he sees now), knowing that there would be the police soon. The shrill wail had stopped; they both knew it had been the voice of Edith Close, but neither yet had the courage to imagine precisely what had caused it. Andy moved closer to his mother, and she shifted slightly so that he, too, could see out the screen door into nothing.

'I told him to wait for the police,' his mother said, her voice tight with strain. It was a strain he is now familiar with, the strain of cautious women with good sense, a voice men often choose to ignore.

'He has a gun,' Andy said, knowing instantly she would not for one minute think that a help.