The Room Outside

The house on Ninth Street, where I lived as a child, had eleven-foot ceilings, and the downstairs rooms opened out of each other and were hard to heat. In late October, with the coal bill much on his mind, my father went from room to room downstairs stuffing toilet paper in the cracks between the windows and the window frames. Storm windows would have been better but they were unknown in our part of the country in the early decades of this century. There was a fireplace in the living room and another in the room we called the library, and when anyone tried to start a fire in either of them puffs of smoke would blow out into the room. The chimneys do not draw well when they are cold, and from the window seat in the library I watch as my father arranges paper and kindling properly between the andirons, and then the logs, and puts a match to the paper and stands holding an opened-out page of the Lincoln *Evening Courier* across the upper part of the opening and waits patiently for the air to start going up the chimney instead of out into the room. If I pull the curtain around me and look out into the winter night, I see the house next door, the fence that divides our yard from the neighbors', a tree trunk, sometimes the moon. If I let the curtain fall back what I see is a reflection of the room I am in, superimposed on what is really out there. When the newspaper catches on fire and vanishes up the flue (because it has now begun to draw properly), I see that, too, reflected in the windowpane.

In the winter of 1931 I have taken the train from Boston to Providence to spend the day with Cletus Oakley and his wife. I am a graduate student at Harvard and he is teaching at Brown. When I was a freshman at the University of Illinois he made it impossible for me not to understand differential and integral calculus. Now, in his car, we drive to some place near Pomfret, Connecticut, where the snow lies across the countryside in deep drifts. He has brought snowshoes for the three of us. I have never had snowshoes on before and find it difficult to keep from stepping on my own feet. We talk as we walk and sometimes I

From William Maxwell: Later Novels and Stories (Library of America, 2008), pp. 735–738. Originally published in *The New Yorker* (December 28, 1998).
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trip and fall and Cletus helps me up. The sun is shining out of a cobalt-blue sky and the air is so dry that breathing is a pleasure. (Why did I never see them again when I liked them so much? How could I have been so stupid as to leave everything, including friendships, to chance?) When the light begins to fail, Cletus drives us to an eighteenth-century house, and there an old woman gives us tea and hot biscuits and honey. We are happy because of the fresh air and exercise, and she is happy because the spring garden catalogues have come.

When I was in my middle twenties I spent a winter on a farm in southern Wisconsin. There it was much colder than it was in Illinois, where, with the wind coming down off Lake Michigan, God knows it is cold enough. Bales of hay were banked all around the foundations of the farmhouse, which was heated by two sheet-iron wood-burning stoves, one upstairs and one downstairs in the room next to my small bedroom. And, of course, the cookstove in the kitchen. In the morning when I woke I sometimes saw a broad band of yellow light in the sky that I have never seen anywhere else, and before I could wash my face I often had to break a thin glaze of ice in the water pitcher on my dresser. The window had to be propped open, by a wooden spool in ordinary weather, a smaller spool if the temperature was twenty below, and if it was colder than that I didn't open the window at all. It was up to me to see that the woodbox in the kitchen was never empty and fill the reservoir on the side of the stove. The air was usually so dry you could run out of the house in your shirtsleeves and fill a bucket of water at the pump but you couldn't touch the pump handle with your bare hands. I also had to keep a patch of ground bare and sprinkled with corn for the quail. If it rained when the temperature was hovering around thirty-two degrees their feathers froze and they couldn't fly into the shelter of the woods.

Eventually there was so much snow on the roads that the snowplow couldn't get through and we were snowbound. One evening after supper the telephone rang and it was a neighbor saying that the mailman had got as far as the Four Corners, where our mailbox was. I put on extra-heavy underwear and,

bundled to the eyes in sweaters and woollen scarves, I started to ski to the Four Corners. The snowdrifts were higher than the horse-and-rider fences, obliterating the divisions between the fields, and I saw what nobody in the family and none of the neighboring farmers had ever seen: a pack of wild dogs running in a circle in the bright moonlight.

My wife and I are planning to spend the first Christmas of our married life in Oregon with her mother and father. We have been living in a small, one-story house in northern Westchester County. It started to snow at dusk the evening before our departure and it has snowed all night. The view from the kitchen window is cribbed from John Greenleaf Whittier. The town snowplows have kept our road open and a taxi delivers us at Harmon station in plenty of time, but for the last hour no trains have come into or left the station. The ticket agent is noncommittal. We wait and wait, consult the station clock, count our luggage. Privately I entertain the possibility that we will spend this Christmas at home. At that moment, far down the tracks to the south, there is a light. "The Twentieth Century Limited to Chicago arriving on Track Four!" the ticket agent announces over the public-address system, and in no time at all we are in our snug compartment looking out at the snow falling in the Hudson River. We are off. We have got away. Upstate New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana are like a long, uninterrupted, white thought. In Chicago the slush is ankle deep. Then we pick up the thought where we left off. It is winter all the way across the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, but in Portland there is no snow on the ground and the camellias are in bloom.

Several families have lived in the house on Ninth Street since my father sold it and some of them loved it as much as I did. They also made changes. Out of kindness, people—sometimes acquaintances, sometimes strangers—send me snapshots of the exterior from the front or the side. Our trees have died of old age or the elm blight and been replaced by others, but why the shutters, and what in Heaven's name happened to the porch railing? Nothing is right that isn't the way I remember it, and

I drop the snapshots in the wastebasket. That room outside, superimposed on the snow: the reflection of the lamp, the table and the chair where my mother likes to sit when she sews, the white bookcase, the Oriental rugs, the man standing at the fireplace and the little boy peering out at the night—that image that was nothing more than a trick of the window glass—is indestructible.