

Do's and Don'ts: Family Rules, Rooms, and Their Relationships

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Our object here is simple: to understand a specific room (and by extension any room, any place) as an institution—that is, as a significant and persistent element in the life of a culture, centered on fundamental human needs, activities, and values and occupying an enduring and cardinal position in society. We conceptualize this room as a *field of values and meanings* manifested to children as *spoken rules* (the do's and the don'ts) and believe that these rules can be used to understand both (a) the room as a field of values and (b) the manner in which this is revealed to children (whereby the institution of the room is reproduced). Toward this end, one of us (Robert Beck) elicited from the other (Denis Wood, age 40) and his family—Ingrid (age 46), Randall (age 11), and Chandler (age 9)—all the rules they felt pertained to each of the 70 “objects” comprising the room. The method was this simple: Bob asked, “What are the rules for the door?” “The couch?” “The mantle?” of Denis, Randall, Chandler, and Ingrid independently (and in this order). What follows here is a statement of the problem and of the larger method (or approach), illustrated by an analysis of the 23 rules pertaining to two “objects”: the screen door and the door proper.

What is home for a child but a field of rules? From the moment he rouses into consciousness each morning, it is a consciousness of what he must and must not do. If during the night his pillows have fallen to the floor, he must pick these up, for *pillows do not belong on the floor, they belong on the bed*. If he thinks of turning on the radio, he must keep it low, for *we do not play the radio loud before everyone is up*. If he needs to urinate, he must go to the bathroom, for *we put our wee-wee in the toilet*. If he is old enough to stand, he must lift the seat, for otherwise he might splash and spatter, and *we do not do that in this house*. When he has finished, he must flush the toilet (for *we always flush the toilet when we're done*) and lower the seat (*because that's how we do things around here*). He is not to sing gloriously in welcome of the day, or dance a fandango back to his bed, or wake his brother by eagerly whispering “Quick, Watson! The game is afoot!” in his startled ear, for *we don't wake people up until they're ready*—unless they're kids and they've got to go to school. Then the rule is: *You've got to get up in plenty of time for school!*

So many rules: No matter how you count them, the number is enormous. Is it one rule that the spoon must go to the right of the knife, and another that the

knife must go to the right of the plate? Or is the way we set the table one rule altogether? Either way, the number of rules about no more than the way we eat, where we eat, when we eat, what we eat, and who eats with us is alarmingly large. Around these, like electrons around the nucleus, swarm still others, rules about how we come together to eat (for instance, *with clean hands*) and rules about how we dissolve the meal (*May I please be excused?*) and still others about washing the dishes and putting them away and who cleans up the dining room and when and how thoroughly, though it is difficult to say which rules swarm around which others, hierarchies are hard to see through the haze of rules, and those that at first blush seem superordinate often turn out to be no more than vague (*You know better than that*).

Hundreds of rules? If the meaning of rule is taken narrowly (*Those spoons go in the drawer to the right of the stove*), there are more likely thousands. Yet, without rules, the spoons might end up anywhere, *would* end up anywhere, out in the sandbox when it's time to eat, or down at the bottom of the creek, although why would anyone care? Dinner would be, dinner wouldn't be—there would be no dinner, no sitting down together, no shared breaking of bread, no shared gulping of milk (*If you're going to gulp your milk like that, you can just go out to the kitchen*), no shared forking of meat and potatoes. Without rules, home is not a home, it is a house, it is a sculpture of

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wood and nails, of plumbing and wiring, of wallpaper and carpet.

Reach

The question asked the student by the teacher—"You wouldn't do that at home, would you?"—takes as granted the universality of the rules, which we pretend either make sense or are natural or both, and so, as with sunlight, are always and everywhere the same. Rules are justified as *rational*—it is demonstrated that failure to comply leads to catastrophe (*If everybody talked at the same time, no one would be able to understand them*)—or as no more than simple codifications of human behavior, the way everyone has always acted (*A man never wears a hat inside a building*). That the very necessity of saying the rule denies the foundations on which these justifications are erected is ignored or denied: But how else to expect obedience without coercion? Or else, there is recourse to coercion (*If you're not going to do what I say, you can just go up to your room*), the issue of justification is never broached, rules are emitted as edicts *ex cathedra*, often precisely because they make no sense (*I know you don't like what they gave you, but you have to thank them for it anyway*) or because the natural way is condemned (*I know it's difficult, but you must control yourself*). Nevertheless, whether rational, natural, or arbitrary, rules are always expected to provide guides for the conduct of actions everywhere (*We expect you to be as well behaved at Greg's house as you are at home*).

But at the same time, it is widely acknowledged that, when in Rome, one does as the Romans do or at least that, when having dinner at the Schaffners', one does as the Schaffners do (*If they insist on saying grace, the least you can do is wait until they're done before you start eating*). But it's not just the Schaffners: Other homes are legion, there are many Romes and any number of places, times, and conditions under which the rules are *expected* to be adapted, bent, or canceled (*Yes, but you're supposed to use your head*). Nor is it only that everybody agrees that the behavior appropriate to the beach might be inappropriate at a ball. It is that there are rules observed at school that are not observed on the street, rules observed in the playground that are not observed at home, and rules observed in the living room that are not observed in the bathroom. The pretense to universality crumbles under the demands of every specific site—culture is concrete: It is manifested not *in general* but necessarily *in situ*—and, although people say the rules, they are *embodied* in specific actions and things. To enter a room is to find oneself immediately amid objects whose character and arrangement admit only of certain possibilities; it is always to enter a unique system of rules. The rules deduced from this

room may often be exogenous (most will be), but inevitably some will prove to be *sui generis*, and the ensemble will in any event be a singular property of the time and the place. It may well suffice to enumerate the rules completely to define any room, just as Maxwell's equations fully characterize the electromagnetic field.

To Study the Rules ...

Although the opposite doesn't follow—the enumeration of things and actions pertaining to a room probably will *not* exhaust the set of all rules (just as Maxwell's equations are incapable of describing quantum and gravitational fields)—it seems nonetheless a good place for an environmental psychologist (Bob) and a psychogeographer (Denis) to commence their study of rules, with those of a room. There is a substance to a room, however elusive it may prove to be: a concreteness, a solidity, a finitude. It may connect to other rooms, but at some point you know you have left it and so left the field of rules of which it is no more than a manifestation. There is a beginning and an end to such rules, to the rules of a place. They can *literally* be enumerated (there are only hundreds of them). They can be known, and they are known. Those whose room it is know the rules; they have imported them from other rooms they have known, or they have invented them for this place alone. No rules, at any rate, will have been introduced by *our* scrutiny, and in fact the whole system is naturally occurring (which is not to say that it is not of culture), not merely the room and the rules, but the *articulation* of the room's rules (*You know you're not supposed to eat in the living room*). It is as though we had been handed a text to read: Whatever the character of our reading, the specification of the text would not enter into it; there it would be, delimited by its incipit and its explicit, except that our text is a room and its rules (as spoken by those whose room it is). We intend a sort of *environmental ethology* in which the attention to the *room* removes the rules by at least one degree from *those enouncing them*, permitting us to see the rules—not as aspects of personality—but, as it were, *in action*.

... Is to Study the Room

But what is the room?

To say "To enter a room is to find oneself immediately amid objects whose character and arrangement admit only of certain possibilities" is not to lie, but only to unfold sequentially (that is, in time) an experience of simultaneity (that is, of space)—for one does not enter *first* a room, *secondly* perceive objects in it, *thirdly* attach significance to them (it is language that makes us do that), but enters *all at once* this

room/objects/significance-thing, this culture (the room is a culture), this mathesis (the room is a way of coming to know the world), this organ (it is a functional structure in the organization of the house), this curriculum, this mnemonic, this field of forces through which one moves as a proton through the magnets of a particle accelerator:

"Please come in," and it may be your hostess speaking, but it is as likely to be the way a rug lies on the floor that whispers this invitation.

"Do sit down," and it may be your host who says this, but it is also a certain capaciousness in a sofa that draws you in and gathers its cushions around you.

"Look at this."

"Be careful of that."

"Watch your feet."

"Make yourself at home."

They are *heard* in time—these voices are heard in time (their text unfolds over many visits)—but the volume of air and the quality of light do not speak independently of the sofa and the table or of the way you are drawn to sit down and smile at your hostess. The walls and floor do not speak before or after the rest of the room. They are not apart, not other, from the rest of the room. The room without objects and the meanings they shed is another room; it is not this one, not the one we entered. In our human living, the petty kingdoms ruled quite independently by architect and decorator and sociologist have no independence: It is not the painted plaster alone that sings to us, but whether something hangs upon it. And if it is a mirror, the song is other than if it is a painting or a print or a calendar whose nudes cradle in their creamy arms replacement parts for pumps and fans.

Which is not to *deny* the walls, not to deny the volume of the air, not to deny the doors or the windows or that quality of sunlight that at any rate at night ceases pouring through them. We have no wish to deny the room in the experience, but to reduce the experience to the room is to leave life for architecture, as it is to leave life for the social sciences when the experience is boiled down to its meaning or to move into a furniture store when all that is regarded is the furnishings. Even to refer to furnishings as furnishings is to miss the point, for few rooms are furnished. They are not stages *set* by a designer on which some actors will recite their lines; they are not settings—they are the resultant (in the sense of a sum of vectors) of a living.

Joints

Let us establish a convention. It is artificial, but so is the language it is intended to circumvent. When we refer to "a part of the inside of a building, shelter, or

dwelling unit usually set off by partitions"—that is, to the room in its exclusively architectural aspect—we put the word inside quotation marks: "room". But when we refer to that resultant of a living inclusive of this "room", the things in it, and their significance, we omit the quotation marks and write just: room. Our desire is to articulate this room—to *give it joints*.

We live the room.

We may spend time, do things, argue, eat, make love in the "room", but *we live the room*. The room is not apart from our living and is no more a consequence of our living than our living is a consequence of the room. Like the outer integument of a pearly chambered nautilus, the room is a shell secreted in the ongoingness of the organism's perseverance. Although it may be common to think of the shell as empty, this is only because we typically encounter shells after the death of their creator-inhabitants, after weeks and months of scouring by sand and water. The shell comes from the sea, it is a *seashell*, we want to imagine it has to do with the water exclusively, that it has nothing to do with cephalopods, with gastropods: We do not see the *beach* as a charnel house. It is as though we were to encounter *rooms* exclusively in the roofless labyrinths of the ruined palaces at Knossos and Mycenae, as though we were to take as rooms none but the bat-infested hollows at Chichen Itza and Uxmal. Yet even these are mnemonics, even here we can hear the *echo* of the rules.

These rules are a form of the room, just as the room is a form of the rules. They *are* the room, expressed in rule-space (where there are also rules expressive of things other than rooms, things like courtship, dinner, and city streets). This is not a game of words. To know the rules of a room is in some sense to *know the room* (incompletely, but then complete knowledge of the room comes only from living it), just as to *see* the room at some moment in time (perhaps from behind the velvet ropes of the guided tour) is in some sense (incomplete again) to *know the rules*. "I wonder," one muses, "what they did *there*," but what they did *elsewhere* is perfectly certain (the rule is obvious), and there is little question about the mass of rules in most of the rooms we are daily in: They are—we would say—*self-evident*, and we follow them without reflection that this is what we're doing. Among adults, the rules are explicitly stated only with respect to extremes (*I think I should warn you, that's extremely fragile*), snares (*Be careful walking on the rugs; they're very slippery*), and illusions (*You can sit in that chair if you wish, but let me warn you that the bottom is likely to fall out*) or as an opportunity to tout a value that might otherwise escape notice (*The only reason I caution you is because it's 4,000 years old, and [deprecating laugh] a little difficult to replace*). Here, what is understood is, *The only reason I caution you is to provide myself an op-*

portunity for mentioning its age and thereby also displaying the attractive modesty that forbids my mentioning what I paid for it, where what is understood is, *I have class, taste, and resources*. Otherwise, the rules are not so much taken for granted as unexpressed, potential, latent in the *values*, latent in the *significance* we find in the objects and the "room", with respect to which the rules are but an expression (as are the character and arrangement of objects themselves, as is the room).

The room is an *expression of values*, the room that is also a shell secreted in the ongoingness of the organism's perseverance. What can this mean but that values too are a shell secreted in the ongoingness of the organism's perseverance?

It can mean nothing else. The values do comprise a shell, a shell that, as with the room, is not something bought and moved into (bought at the Value Store, democratic values down the aisle, autocratic values on the third floor, Christian values—on sale—in the basement). It is not a setting, acquired once and for all, within which mental life takes place (as in *Where did you get your values?*), but it is exactly like the room, a resultant (in the sense of a sum of vectors) of a living. It is, however, *mental*, known to the organism summing the values but to no one else except insofar as they are bodied forth in action. To say this is to deny the values nothing except corporeality; it is to imagine them much as we imagine a magnetic field that, whether or not made visible in the filings of iron, is nonetheless there. Similarly, the room makes the values visible, embodies them in *its* corporeality, *is* the values in their corporeal form.

This is not to say that there exists between the room and the values it incarnates an isomorphism or that the room may not constitute itself an attempted deception, fraud, or illusion. This results from the fact that the expression of values in a room is neither certain nor univocal. It is constrained by the available resources (the room is an economy); or the values are self-contradictory, and the room must represent one position at the expense of the other (the room is an interpretation), or it variously embodies the values (the room is a performance); or it embodies yesterday's values (the room is an archaeological site) or the values of one's parents (the room is an echo, a memory, a shrine). Moreover, the room may be constrained to express the values of more than one person, and one expression may be garbled by that of another, or unnaturally reinforced, or completely canceled. Or an unanticipated expression may be observed, the resultant purely of the simultaneous expression of unrelated values: A room may embody the values of husband *and* wife for instance, each imperfectly, and the resultant expression may be of a certain *sociability* or *sense of compromise*. Or a rented room may express the values of both owner

and occupant and thus may lend substance to no more than an empty and conceivably unintended *sense of subordination* (as when the bare walls of the occupant substantiate nothing but the owner's proscription of putting holes in them).

And yet, despite the number and subtlety of these filters, the understanding is *that all adults can see through them*, that all adults can *apprehend* the value behind them, that all adults will respect the room accordingly (that is, *behave appropriately*, as though they *shared* the values concretized by the room). This means that explicit verbalization of these values is unnecessary—they are obvious, *they are written in the room*—and, consequently, such explication inevitably takes on the air of an act of patronage, as though the individual receiving the explication were someone who might not see, might not apprehend, that is, as though he were not quite an adult, as though he were, perhaps, a child.

Stripping the Room

Because it is *not* presumed that *children* will be capable of reading these values, the presence of children in a room precipitates a veritable orgy of rule enunciations: *Don't touch, Be careful, That's fragile, Stay away from that table, Don't sit in that chair, That clock's not something to play with, NO RUNNING IN THE LIVING ROOM!* It is like lowering the cathode into an old-fashioned battery. Immediately a stream of electrons is stripped from the anode: Just so, the introduction of kids into a room strips rules from every space or object the kids approach, rules dissociate themselves from walls and floor (*I don't want to see any dirty hand marks on these walls; don't just leave your stuff all over the floor*), from glass surfaces and wooden ones (*Please keep your fingerprints off the windows; You know putting your wet glass down there is going to leave a ring—why do you do that?*), from individual objects and the room as a whole (*You are not to touch those speakers; When people are talking in the living room, you don't just barge in and interrupt*). No part or aspect of the room escapes being implicated in this reaction whereby values are transformed into rules. To put it slightly differently, kids *excite* adults to express the values manifested in the room as (in the form of) prescriptive rules. This enables the adults to *maintain* their *values* (by protecting the *room* from the barbarians, from the kids) at the same time that it enables them to *reproduce* them (that is, to instill the values in the barbarians, to inject them into the kids through the hypodermic of the rules). A room without kids (or other barbarians)—that is, a room without someone deemed incompetent to respect the values implicit in it (of which it is always a bodying forth)—is a room whose rules are latent. Any member of a similar culture (*anyone who has lived a similar room*) may be

presumed able to imagine what the rules would be were the room to be invaded by nieces and nephews, by the kids from down the hall, by the sons and daughters of a colleague, by a neighbor's ... *dog*.

But until such invasion, the rules remain precisely that, *imagined*: potential utterances, future imperatives, conceivable curses, but inevitably: *latencies*. Because the presence of kids excites these into action—stripping them from the values they prescriptively represent—the presence of kids exposes the values in their verbal form to the scrutiny of any observing intelligence, no longer through the presumptive transparency of the objects and their arrangements within the “room”, no longer through “a reading”, but as though they were naked: The presence of kids forces the rules to disrobe (*Aw, mom, why do we have to?*).

In other words, to flush the values from their cover of furniture and rugs, sparkling windows and unsmudged woodwork, all that is necessary is to strip away the rules. And all that is necessary to strip away the rules is the presence of a kid ... or two. Two kids—the sons of Denis and Ingrid—helped us with this work: Randall (age 11) and Chandler (age 9). Over the years, their presence in the living room had stripped away somewhere over 200 rules. Denis and Ingrid, it should hardly be necessary to remark, *knew* these rules: In fact, they had *actualized* them, *turned them into speech* for, as they would say, “the benefit of the kids” (but actually for the benefit of the room and, often enough, for the “room”). However that may be, these rules were directed *to* the kids—are directed to the kids; it was *their* behavior these rules were expected to shape, and Denis and Ingrid often violated the rules, or construed themselves as exceptions to them, by virtue of age, experience, or special circumstance. Although it is probably true that adults continue to “grow up” through the process of teaching these rules to their kids—because the presence of the kids in general embarrasses them into obeying them, or else into sophistry, or into shouting (coercion), or into junking the rules—nevertheless the room is a *field of rules* essentially *for the kids*. So, while Bob *did* inventory the room and its rules by interviewing Denis—Ingrid reviewed this work, commenting on it as she saw fit—Bob elicited the majority of the rules comprising the corpus for our reading from Randall and Chandler, simply by asking them, sitting in the room, “What are the rules for the door?” “The couch?” “The mantle?” and recording their answers.

Parsing the Room

To inventory the room: What can this mean? Only this: that the room will be broken up, disassembled, shattered.

Of necessity, this must be an arbitrary operation: If the room is a shell secreted in the ongoingness of the organism's perseverance (in this case, the Wood family), then its fundamental characteristic *as a room* lies precisely in its wholeness. Although interiors magazines of a certain type make no bones about hacking up a room (*a Regency table on a Moroccan rug, a parson's table beside a leather sofa*), they never do more than list furnishings (they express fashion). What (barely) looks like a room, what *wants* to look like a room (but there is no life in it), is often not even a “room”, and frequently the subject of their enumeration is literally a *set* organized exclusively for the provision of a photograph that their prose will then *establish*. These cleavages that seem so evident at a certain distance (plant, table, couch) are less apparent closer up, whereas others that previously went unnoticed suddenly seem unavoidable. It is a matter of the level of attention, but to say these things does not reduce the terror of the hanging question: *Where to cut?*

That plant over there, for instance, all at once reveals itself as a collection of plants, each plant dissolving into a plant, potting material, soil, pot, saucer, coaster. That table, a simple, pure whole if ever one existed (it is Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona table), immediately shatters into legs and glass top, four white plastic studs, and a small transparent disc (which often gets lost) used to compensate for a floor anything but flat. The couch explodes into a throw pillow, three back cushions, three seat cushions, and the couch proper, each with its own slipcase—that is, into 16 parts, each in turn susceptible of further division (for example, the main body of the slipcover has 118 individual snaps).

Nor is this division at all academic. In the life of the room, the couch gets dirty, the slipcovers are removed, they are washed, hung out to dry, and replaced. Before the floor can be waxed, twice a year, the table is moved. To do this, the glass top is lifted up—it is not attached to the legs, it just sits on them (this is its elegance)—and put someplace (often on the couch, itself already moved), while the legs are put somewhere else (anywhere). Inevitably the little transparent disc is misplaced. The plants are moved all the time, they get taken in and taken out, are moved to locations receiving more sun and less sun, get repotted, die (and, although this often seems to be the only thing they do by themselves, they also live—this is their charm). In any case, today's ensemble is not the one that occupied its location the day before (the ensemble in the corner by the speaker now, as we write, is not the one that was there when we inventoried the room).

At the same time, plant, table and couch are caught up in the coffee table ensemble; to sit on the couch is *always* to confront this table, and beyond it the plants

(*some* plants in any event). Couch, table, plants comprise a tissue in this room that is an organ in the life of the house, a whole no less whole than the couch is a whole (the proposition is ambiguous), than its cushions are wholes, than their slipcovers are wholes, than their closures are wholes, than their snaps are wholes, than their stud sides are wholes (they have been manufactured, you can pick them up, look at them, you can sew them to the cloth), than *their* sewing holes are. ...

Perhaps *here*, with the holes in the stud side of the couch-cushion slipcover snaps, we have lost it (there is nothing left; the coffee table ensemble has been analyzed into holes), lost the room, this room anyhow, the living room; for, with the pushing of the needle through the sewing holes of the stud side of the snap, we have entered another room, the room in which Ingrid made the slipcover perhaps, or the one in an upholsterer's shop, but we are no longer here. We are somewhere else.

Where to set the distinction? Where to draw the line? Where to cut? *Snaps? Cushions? Couch? Over by the coffee table? Living room?* It is not as though you could get to one without hacking through another: Any cut you make cuts through everything. To get to the heart, you have to cut through skin, slice through muscle, saw through bone; and then the heart is only the literal heart, not the one that will answer all the questions, not the one you were looking for. It is just the machine that pumps the blood, dead outside of its position in the structure, dead and meaningless. So it is with the room. One cuts not for understanding (not to find the essence) but for convenience (to get on with the living): When they hear *Don't slide down the banister!* Randall and Chandler might be hard pressed to say what a banister is, but they understand exactly what they're not supposed to do. This is the way we cut up the room, without thinking too much about it, completely arbitrarily (completely "naturally" we like to say, but we know better), as though we were walking through it, saying what we saw:

"Screen door" (but not stile, rail, screen, handle, latch, or lock).

"The door."

"The doorframe."

"The window in the door."

"The windows in the sidelights" (but we overlooked the fanlight).

"The bells" (the string of camel bells hanging from the doorknob).

"The latch and lock."

"The floor."

These things (we refer to them as *things*) sometimes imply a system (in referring to the *large record cabinets*, for example, we embrace in that phrase the twelve 14-in. Palaset cubes, the six Palaset bases, and

the Palaset connectors), other times parts of systems (thus we distinguished among the *newel post*, the *banister*, the *stair treads*, and the *stair risers*). It was a question of creating a starting place, a place from which to launch ourselves into the rules, and, except insofar as the things had had rules stripped from them by Randall and Chandler, their nomination was a matter of essential indifference.

Thing and Rule by Thing and Rule

Things. Things and rules stripped from them by Randall and Chandler. These are, of course, the room, *turned through a certain angle*, but it is also how we shall proceed, thing and rule by thing and rule. This unfolding will follow a kind of order (of necessity, it will follow *some* order), but this order will never be presumed. Although we start with the screen door, the door, the doorframe, the window in the door, the windows in the lights, the bells and so work our way into the room, we shall never imagine that the *room* starts with the screen door, the door, the doorframe, never imagine that the room might not be entered from the dining room, from the second floor via the stairs, or—waking up from a nap—from the couch, from within the very "room" itself. Immersed in a book, one looks up and ... *enters the room*.

Consequently, we display no plan of the "room" here—none of the room is possible—for, although a plan insists on no order (space itself never implies an order that is solely of time), its synopticism is conclusive as the room is not. And, herein lies the advantage of our procedure, for, halting as it is (pausing as it does to admire the sparks struck from each thing, the small fires kindled by the mingled rules), it gives as a result no conclusion, no place to stop, no ... *larger structure* (it gives no canonical Room, no general Rule, no archetypal Thing). Instead of closing the door on the room—which *is* the things, which *is* the rules (which is the *values* energizing the rules)—it throws open the windows as well, allowing the admitted breeze to touch first this and then that, to keep the room *stirred up*, to keep it from solidifying, to prevent it from precipitating *the* crystalline room, *the* collection of objects, *the* sociology of rules. There are only *these* rules and *these* objects and *this* "room".

There is only this ... *plurality*, compounded of momentary injunctions, arbitrary parsings, edges that are contingent at best. Yet echoing in this plural—in this room—are voices, of which the rules are no more than the most explicit articulation. It is these voices to which we must attend, to which we *do* attend, because it is these voices that give us, not the room (there is no room, only its living) but the dimensions of the space in which it is lived: There is the Voice of Comfort (soft couch, old wicker rocker), the Voice of Convenience (rugs up in the summer), the Voice of

High Culture (the records, the paintings), the Voice of a certain Easy Formality (an implicit asceticism, its violations), the Voice of a Well-Ordered Life (the neatness, the cleanliness). Through these, behind them, underneath them (it is not easy to tell where they are coming from), still further voices can be made out: that of the bourgeoisie certainly, but also others; the voice of a dead modernity; more than a whisper of Anglo-American puritanism; perhaps, if you listen attentively, the murmur of a smothered anger, unless we are trying too hard and mistake but a buzzing in our ears.

The Screen Door

Rule 1. "Don't push on the screen" (Chandler, tPRO).

Rule 2. "Don't push things through the holes in the screen" (Ingrid, tPRO).

Rule 3. "Don't slam it" (Chandler, ktAPP).

Rule 4. "Close it every time you go through" (Randall, tCON).

Rule 5. "Don't kick it" (Chandler, tPRO).

Rule 6. "Don't open it to strangers" (Randall, kCON).

Rule 7. "Don't open it to strangers or certain others" (Denis, kCON).

Rule 8. "Don't talk through the screen to guests or friends" (Denis, kAPP).

Rule 9. "Don't lock the screen against family members" (Denis, kCON).

So many rules? But then, the thing is present to us in *so many ways*. It is, in the first instance, inevitably, *a thing*, a material body. As such, it falls under the sway of an entire cacophony of degrading processes that reach conclusion only in the thing's destruction: The thing is cracked, ripped, dropped, smashed, abraded, worn, spotted, scratched, smudged, torn, warped, bent, broken—in a word, *ruined*. This occurs unless the thing is preserved—that is, unless it is repaired, mended, picked up, put back together again, sanded, replaced, washed, polished, cleaned, straightened, set, fixed (all of which could be avoided, parents unceasingly promise their children, if only the causative acts could be prevented—that is, if the thing could be protected from the barbarians, from the kids). And *vice versa*, because each act of destruction slashes two ways: It is not only the window that is broken (with its attendant anxieties of having to get a new piece of glass—*And when am I supposed to do that?*—and of having to pick up some caulking compound, and then of having actually to fix the window), but the kid's skin that is (sickeningly) cut (with its attendant nightmares of having to staunch the flow of blood—without getting any on the couch—while trying simultaneously to calm the

hysterical and guilt-ridden child *and* find the hydrogen peroxide, gauze, tape, and *the damned scissors that nobody ever puts back!!*). It is not only the *objet d'art* that is smashed, but the kid who falls on his face among the shards; it is not only, to get to our case, the screen that is gradually ruined by the tidling fingers, but the mosquitoes and flies that subsequently make it inside to buzz around, annoy, and ultimately bite. So, in the first place, the thing needs to be protected from the kids, but not more than they need to be protected from it.

When a rule has this function in the regulation of the living known as the room, we indicate it thus: PRO, noting that it is more or less oriented toward protecting the *thing* with a prefixal *t* (tPRO) or more or less oriented toward protecting the *kid* with a prefixal *k* (kPRO).

The second way the thing is present to us is precisely in its utilitarian aspect: *it keeps the flies out*. Here it is not that it *is* that matters, but what it *does*. What it does is keep out, reflect, insulate, support, let in, permit, terminate, hold, cushion, enhance, moderate, modulate—in a word, *control*—the processes that are a living incarnate. In that these processes are oriented either toward the child more directly (toward *his* body, toward *his* behavior) or toward the thing more directly (toward *its* maintenance, toward *its* use), control, like protection, has to be viewed under two lights. *Close it every time you go through* is a rule oriented more directly toward the door: It says what one should do to the door (*close it*), it implies a host of things that may or may not be kept out of the house, it isolates in a very broad way the role of the door: to keep things out, to act as a filter of the stream of stuff flowing toward the house. *Don't open it to strangers*, on the other hand, is directed through the door to the child, is motivated by an image of what could happen to the child were this one particular thing (a stranger) to gain entry to the house, although actually it cannot be intended to achieve even this end (it cannot be intended to save the little pigs from the wolf) because, in the actual case, it can never have been imagined that Randall's or Chandler's refusal to open the screen door could impede the entry of a determined stranger given that the door proper is wide open, that the fiberglass is sagging in its frame, and that the screen door itself is unlocked. Thus, the rule is not only *not* directed toward the door, it is scarcely directed toward the child except insofar as it exploits the door as a prop in his *education*, helping to teach him to discriminate among strangers, certain others, guests, friends, and family. Because it cannot *work*, the rule is forced to play; it is a form of playing about control. It is *playing control*, part of a highly elaborate game, *playing house*—only this is not the game kids play among themselves but the much more serious game parents

play with a child in the attempt to reproduce their culture (to instill it in the barbarians, in the kids).

Rules concerned with control we indicate with a CON, prefixing the *t* or *k* as needed to suggest—nothing more is possible—that it leans more toward the thing or more toward the kid.

But how to code *Don't slam it*? On its face, it begs to be taken as a rule for the protection of the door. Slamming cannot be good for the door, therefore we protect the door by prohibiting slamming. On the other hand, its patent subject is a matter of control, what one *does* with the door: One opens a door (to let in) and closes it (to keep out). There is no room for slamming in this scheme, and, to preserve the scheme, we prohibit slamming; it is a way of defining the door (it is something we do not slam).

In fact, these are detours whose purpose is to naturalize the cultural, for the prohibition of slamming is devoted neither to the door as a thing nor to its role. It is concerned, rather, with the way one *is* toward the thing. It is a matter of relations, of attitude, of orientation, of style, of *appearances*—it falls under the appearance code. Such rules are the least likely to frankly advertise their allegiance. This is expressly because they are the most difficult to justify on grounds of nature (that is, the most difficult to justify to kids without invoking parental will). On this count, they are the rules most likely to lead to the heart of the culture, for which very reason they are those most likely to camouflage themselves as rules of protection or rules of control. In fact, screen doors are not to be slammed because either it is irritating (*If they slam that door one more time ...*) or else it bespeaks kids who entirely lack a sense of decorum, the awareness of which can be no less irritating (*Those jerks!*). In both cases, what is offended is not the door or its function (after all, the whole point of a screen door with a spring stop is to close itself, and, in the absence of the automatic door closer, this is certain to be with a WHAM!) but some (often implicit) sense of *the way things ought to be*. That is, what is offended is culture in its purest manifestation—in particular, that Voice of a Well-Ordered Life that is so surely the hallmark of a certain class of professional. Or, to be more explicit, there is in the slamming of the door a kind of abandon, almost a wantonness, that Denis, at any rate, cannot accept in his children (Ingrid stresses the noise—that is, the disregard for others: Nonetheless, this is a question of appearance). It is this that most profoundly motivates the ban on letting the door slam, so much so that, despite the fact that the sound *per se* of a distant door slamming is not only accepted but positively appreciated, insofar as such slamming is a sign of a certain lack of self-control, the signified pollutes the signifier, and the sound (the door's) and the act (the kid's) are both subjects of the rules. We indicate this by prefixing to an APP both a *k* and a *t*.

It so happens that the nine rules elicited for the screen door refer to the three codes under which all the remaining rules can be grouped. That this can be so in spite of an undeniable marginality invariably associated with screen doors (there is nothing, for instance, of Architecture about them) reflects the wider significance of the screen door in the home (to say nothing of the house), where this home may be understood as having the same relation to house that room bears to "room". That is, although we may play games, have dinner, do homework, sleep, and do housework in the house, we *live the home*, in the living of which we also live rooms, usually, although not necessarily, in "rooms". When the door proper is open, the screen door regulates access to all four of these: (a) to the "room" (to get into it from outside), (b) to the room (to collaborate in its living), (c) to the house (necessarily, for the "room" is located here, but also because this "room" is a passageway to other "rooms"), and (d) to the home (here not a collection of "rooms" or even rooms, but a living in its own right). Thus, the distinction between inside and outside made by the screen door for the house is paralleled by that between the insider and the outsider made by the screen door for the home. More narrowly, the house may be characterized, among other ways, as an association (largely commensal) of domestic fauna whose distinctiveness is guaranteed by the relative impermeability of its edge: roof, walls, floor, foundation. In this edge—let us refer to it as a *membrane*—the screen door acts as an important gating device. It permits us and all the truly *microfauna* through while stopping the birds and the bees, the moths, mosquitoes, and flies, the stray cats and the neighbors' dogs. *It keeps the flies out*; hence, the simple rule, *Close it every time you go through*. At the same time, it defines *us* for the home, specifies the *macrofauna* for whom the home is a living. This is less simple, and so, whereas one rule sufficed for the house, four are needed for the home. *Don't lock the screen door against family members*, emitted to stop the kids from locking each other out (and adventitiously their parents), has nonetheless the force of defining the family: *those you do not lock out of the house*. Denis's father once locked the kitchen door against his son when, as we say, Denis was still living at home (but what can this phrase mean?). Denis got in through a window, but the sense of violation can be reanimated by any locked door; the urgency with which he advances this rule is born of this memory. The memory awakes other memories: He was returning from a tryst; the overhead light was on; Nancy and Jasper had been fighting; Denis and Jasper shouted at each other. If the room is a mnemonic, so is the screen door.

Don't talk through the door to guests or friends needs to be completed to make sense: *You invite them*



in! Family you cannot lock out, friends and guests you cannot keep standing on the porch. On the other hand, strangers are those you have to keep out (*Don't open it to strangers*)—that is, *Strangers are those you do not let in*. The *certain others* (of Rule 7) comprise a class that comes and goes, swells, shrinks, and vanishes. It includes neighbors (often children) whose presence inside violates someone's sense of the house (often Randall's or Chandler's). At the time we elicited the rules, Frank and Billy were *personae non gratae*. At the time of this writing (6 months later), Billy is present in the "room" (he is characteristically annoying), and Frank is by way of being the kids' friend. The *certain others* form a twilight class: When they get invited in, they'll have become friends; or, they'll have become friends when they get invited in. It happens like that, suddenly, at the door.

We feel at a door, even at a screen door with sagging screening, the full force of the rules of the room, of the home. It is all here. The door is a plentitude. It is certainly a mathesis. No less obviously it is a functional tissue of an organ of the house (if the room were a stomach, the screen door would be the esophageal sphincter). It is a mnemonic. It reflects an economy (the screen door is cheap). It is part of a curriculum. The field of forces it projects protects it. It establishes and maintains a system of appearance. It regulates certain functions of the house and, in so doing, generates a taxonomy of persons, a taxonomy based neither on sex nor size nor color nor age, a taxonomy established ... *by the door*. Few eat in the house, and fewer still at the kitchen table. But among

those who do, fewer still *just walk in*. Whatever their kinship, those who do are family—that is, collaborators in the living that is the home. And all the others are ... *something else*.

The Door

Rule 10. "Don't slam the door" (Denis, ktAPP, tPRO).

Rule 11. "Don't play with the door" (Denis, ktAPP, ktPRO, tCON).

Rule 12. "Don't use the door as a 'gate' in a game: Play inside or outside" (Ingrid, kPRO, tCON).

Rule 13. "Don't get your fingers caught in the door" (Denis, kPRO).

Rule 14. "Don't hang on the door" (Denis, tPRO).

Rule 15. "Don't kick it" (Chandler, tPRO).

Rule 16. "Don't open it too wide because it scratches the floor" (Chandler, tPRO).

Rule 17. "Don't let just anybody in" (Denis, kCON).

Rule 18. "Don't open the door to just anybody" (Denis, kCON).

Rule 19. "Don't go to the door and, when you see somebody's there, just go away. Go up and open the door and see who it is" (Denis, kAPP).

Rule 20. "Close the door against the heat" (Ingrid, tCON).

Rule 21. "Close the door if the furnace is on" (Ingrid, tCON).

Rule 22. "Close the door behind you" (Denis, tCON).

Rule 23. "Open the door for fresh air" (Ingrid, tCON).

In fact, the screen door is a fake. That this diaphanous poseur is able to project the rules of the room is entirely due to the authority of the door that stands behind it, ready at the yank of an arm to make substantial what in the screen is no more than gossamer. The screen door is not even skin; it is more like clothing, changed with the seasons. Here, in fact, it is literally clothing, assumed with the aluminum siding in which the house was clad in the early 1950s, whereas the door proper transcends skin (it is all but bone, it is cartilage).

It is the door, then, that is actually the plentitude, the curriculum, the translucent elastic tissue that generates a taxonomy of persons. The screen door? It is opened *just to get to the door*. Denis and Ingrid tell a story. They were at dinner with the kids in the kitchen. They heard the door open (they heard the bells, they heard the whinny of the hinges). It had to be Martie. Who else would *just walk in*? "Martie!"

they called, "Come have dinner!" Instead of Martie coming toward the kitchen, they heard feet begin the ascent of the stairs to the second floor. Denis rushed to the living room to find a stranger on his way back down. "Yes? Can I help you?" "I'm looking for Herman. He said, just come in, up the stairs, first on the right—but that's a bathroom!" "Yes," said Denis, "probably—but he was talking about the rooming house across the street."

And explaining himself, he showed him the door. What else could he have showed him? There is nothing to *show* in a screen door (one would have to have said, "And explaining himself, he showed the stranger out"): Air is its essence. But the essence of door is earth, it is bone. A door is bone that stretches, it is wall that moves. Whereas the screen door could keep the flies out, the door proper can keep out the very air, and thus *we close the door against the heat and close the door if the furnace is on*. Here it is acknowledged that, as the house is an association of domestic fauna, it is also a bubble of air the quality of which is zealously monitored: It is *a little cool* (*don't you think so?*) or it is *quite warm* and *Who turned up the thermostat?* or *sniff, sniff, there is a strange smell around here somewhere or I'm opening up. It's too stuffy in here*. As the single largest aperture in the membrane assuring the integrity of this bubble—at 12 square feet, the door is nearly as large as the effective openings of the three operable living room windows taken together—it is the single most powerful element in its control. Thus, if already closed, *we always close the door behind us*, but we also *open the door for fresh air*. The issue is control of the *house* in a simple and direct way (the door is a valve) just as the issue is control of the *home* when the rule is *Don't let just anybody in* and *Don't open the door to just anybody* (where the door materializes a taxonomy of persons).

But as person is not independent of speech, so here control of the home is not independent of control of the house, because to make himself or herself known, a stranger needs to make his or her voice heard, but where air is blocked, so is voice (the door is a gag). Thus, we have a problem of appearances, here that of a guarded hostility: The doorbell rings, Chandler heads toward it but, failing to recognize who is there, retreats back up the stairs or out to the kitchen, remarking, "I don't know who it is." The subsequent approach of Denis or Ingrid, trailed by Chandler, who is, of course, curious (he was only obeying Rule 18: *Don't open the door to just anybody*), can only be that of the security guard summoned to superintend the after-hours breaching of the walls of a downtown office building when someone working late attempts to let himself or herself out. This obsessive scenario is predicated on the perceived threat of a hostile environment, and its inherent defensiveness projects

onto the stranger at the door (one of Denis's students, someone intrigued by Ingrid's plants) the offensive character of a thief, of a child molester, of a Seventh Day Adventist. All of this contradicts the cordial and generous reception Denis and Ingrid want to imagine they extend to guests and strangers (that they are hospitable, that theirs is a hospitable home, even that their living room is welcoming). Hence, *You don't go to the door and, when you see somebody's there, just go away. You open the door and see who it is. Yet, You don't open the door to just anybody*.

Except for the empty accommodation achieved through abandonment of the latter rule as a consequence of the increasing maturation of the kids, these rules, rooted in different worlds (a world of utopian amicability, a world of resigned hostility) cannot be reconciled, or they can be reconciled only in the ancient ambivalence surrounding *strangers*. In any case, their simultaneous enunciation represents decidedly more than the transition from a phase in the living of the home during which the door is answered exclusively by the adults to one in which the children have become adults. It represents precisely the precarious suspension of a predisposition toward hospitality—in which the doors are opened to strangers (etymology: hospitality can be manifested *only* toward strangers)—in a world shrill with the conviction that strangers are never more than potential enemies (etymology: strangers *are* enemies). In the attempt to inculcate friendliness but not foolishness, one doesn't *open* the door to strangers (Rule 6), but one does open the door to *see* who it is (Rule 19). For kids, the greater ambiguity induced by the non-conformance of the rules is lost in the lesser ambiguity investing the word *see* because, as they point out, given the window in the door, "We can always *see* who it is." In fact, it is only when they can *see* that they do not know the person at the door that they are urged to open it to *see* who it is. What is elided in the synesthesia is an interest in the stranger's purpose, in his *intentions*. What the conflict demonstrates is that, if Denis and Ingrid are not Philemon and Baucis, they want to be, not in fear of losing their house in a flood of divine wrath, but out of a desire to see in their home a temple (etymology: consecrated place). Here the door becomes a marker, not between sacred and profane, but between sacred and cursed.

Yet at the same time, or more precisely *at any other time*, the door is an invitation to play. This is inevitable: There is a string of bells hanging from the doorknob. The doorknob turns. The door swings open. It can be slammed shut (it will be slammed shut to materialize the screen door). It can be hung on. It can be swung on. Things can be crushed between the jamb and the butt stile (the door is a giant lever, a nutcracker). It can be played behind. This is especially true when the door stands open, when having

broken away from the wall to invade the room—sweeping out 6 square feet of the floor—it hangs with all its parts temptingly exposed, begging to be fiddled with, creating between it and the wall of the room a small wedge, a cave, in the corner. One might crouch in this corner to surprise another coming through the doorway, who might in reaction attempt to flatten the first by shoving the door back against the wall. Butt against wainscoting, desperate to escape Flat Stanley's fate, the first pushes back with all the strength he has coiled, the second steps out of the way, the door kicks forward, the first stumbles and his fingers slip—between the butt stile and the jamb. Or the second is shoved off balance and his fingers get caught between the jamb and the lock.

It is this hysterical scenario that Denis rehearses, recalling with a physical thrill the pain of the car door closing on his fingers—or were they, as his brother Peter insists, *Peter's fingers*, and it was Denis closing the door? In the calculation of sibling debt, it matters, but here it only matters that playing at the door propels Denis into a sort of mad-dog fury of rule enunciation, *NO PLAYING WITH THE DOOR*, and its obsessive variants, *Don't use the door as a "gate" in a game: play inside or outside*, *Don't get your fingers caught in the door*, *Don't hang on the door*, *Don't kick it*, which even Chandler notes are all "basically playing with the door" and which Randall observes "apply to every door in this house". It is the memory of the car door on West 25th Street in Cleveland (and perhaps here no more than the memory of a *premonition*) or the suppression of the memory of a bedroom door in the apartment on Spruce Court (and the responsibility for Peter's pain) that, through its infection of *all* doors, erupts through *this* door into *this* rash of rules.

The Voice of Comfort

What for the child is a field of rules is for the adult a nest of comforts. From the moment he rouses into consciousness each morning, it is a consciousness of what does and does not satisfy. The pillow is comfortable beneath the head, or it is not. The room has a fine fresh air, or it is stuffy. The floor feels good to the feet, or it is unpleasantly cold. The coffee is wonderful, or something is wrong with it. The shower is great, or not. This is the Voice of Comfort—graciously acknowledging each little satisfaction or (less graciously) its absence—an aperitive voice bespeaking, finally, the endless contrivances of bourgeois society toward whose luxuriance of satisfactions everything in the home conspires, including the door or, perhaps, ... *the door above all*.

Strictly speaking (from this perspective especially), there is no *door*, there are only the doors: The distinction between them is empty (or it is spoken in a different voice), the rules apply equally to both, or

they make sense for either only given the other, or they migrate from door to door with the doorway cooperating in a vast collusion of walls and windows and doors and fans that is organized to maintain the integrity of the living called the home—and not incidentally to maintain a certain level of comfort—by controlling the permeability of its edge.

Each of the parties to this operation is ridiculously simple. The door proper has but a single operating condition (this is its seriousness) and (if only because the house is not level, and, when open, the door swings *all the way open*) two states, open and closed: It is never cracked, it is never ajar. The screen door has two states too, but it also has two operating conditions (this is its frivolity): Its opening is glazed or screened, and it is open or closed. The prevailing combination of states and conditions is a function of sets of simultaneously applicable rules and habits with dominion over three distinct scales of operation.

At the nearest, a decision is made to open or close the door(s) in response to the pressure of a sharp spike on some perceptual index: Martie is at the door (and *you let her in*), Ingrid has driven up in a cab filled with groceries (and *you keep the doors open until you've brought them in*), smoke is pouring from the kitchen (and *you open the doors to let it out*), a jackhammer is raising a racket in the street (and *you close the door to keep it out*).

At a less immediate—we prefer to call it *local*—scale, the door stands open or closed as a mark of the family's receptibility. Here the encysting system expands to include porch, living room and other house lights, the telephone, and information about habits of receptibility circulated among friends and acquaintances: The house is *closed up for the night* (and the door is closed), or Ingrid *goes to lie down for a while* (and she closes the door), or Denis wishes *not to be disturbed* (and he closes the door), or, after the kids are in bed, the adults decide *to go for a walk around the block* (and they take the phone off the hook, cut off the living room lights, and close the door).

At the furthest—or *global*—scale, the door is open or closed, and the screens or storm windows put in or taken out according to a handful of rules regulating the quality of air inside the house: We *close the door if the furnace is on* (that is, in the winter), and we *close the door against the heat* (that is, during the day in the summer), but we *open the door for fresh air* (that is, summer mornings and summer nights and during spring and autumn days).

The door is thus subject to a threefold sovereignty. Immediately the door is under the sway of the taxonomy of values it materializes (*stranger/acquaintance*, *food/trash*, *fresh air/smoke*, *noise/quiet*), but these are not solely of the moment, and the door serves also to maintain the climate of the house (the quality of its air) and the climate of the home (is it

"family time," or can Frank come in and play?). The door is a valve, but it is also a sign, albeit one whose signified is able only intermittently to inhabit it as the signifier undergoes its seasonal metamorphoses. In the winter, when the door is closed to retain the heat diffused by the radiators, *that* it is closed means little (there is no difference in which to root the meaning). Then, when the days are shorter and the dark more prevalent, it is the state of the living room lights—that of the lamp by the couch, that of the lamp by the plants—that constitutes the sign. With the onset of spring, however, the door and the operable windows will be more and more often open during the day, although it will be some time (a measure of the uncertainty associated with seasonal change) before the glass is taken from the storm door. Only then will the door proper come into its own as a valve on the local scale and hence as a sign of the family's willingness to receive visitors. With the onset of summer, however, the door proper will be increasingly closed again during the day, as will, slightly later, the operable windows and, slightly later still, their storm windows. At summer's height, the door will be opened early in the morning but soon closed, along with the windows and their storm windows, none of which will be opened again until evening (although even then, the door itself will be closed as soon as the whole-house fan is activated). Again, *that* the door is closed when it is all but always closed means little at the local scale where the sign of receptibility operates (at the global scale, it is widely accepted as signaling the presence of air conditioning). With the onset of fall, door and windows will be more and more often closed at night and opened later and later in the morning. One cold day, often Halloween, the screens in the screen door will be replaced by the storm windows. The door itself will be less and less likely found standing open. Slightly later, the storm windows in the windows will be more or less permanently closed for the season. It is a kind of endless thermal farce, one window being raised as another is lowered, this fan off, that screen up, these storm windows down, those windows down, the furnace on, the furnace off, windows up, storm windows up, screens down, fans on, doors open, windows closed, storm windows disappearing into the basement, screens popping up from the basement. It's a *dance*, a door-and-window dance (with fans: It's a fan dance); it's a glass, wooden, aluminum, and fiberglass round dance, a dance around the seasons, a dance around the days, a dance done to the song sung by the Voice of Comfort.

But what is this comfort achieved with so much opening and closing of windows and doors? Certainly it is no bed of roses. Certainly it is not the life of Riley. It is a labor. More precisely, it is the *form* of a labor, the form of a living: Comfort is the shape of an exertion. This shape is anything but innocent. Not

only is comfort bought with great effort (and comfort is always a *great* effort), but it is bought at great *expense*. No more than the enumeration of the glass, wood, aluminum, and fiberglass consumed by the doors is required to sketch an entire economy that comfort justifies; but, when it is acknowledged that the fans run on electricity generated by the burning of coal and the fission of uranium and that the furnace burns oil, immediately the climate of the house is implicated in the climate of the globe—from the changes induced directly by the increased concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to those secondary, tertiary, and quaternary consequents not exclusive of the presence of American warships in the Persian Gulf. The system of contrivances that is the comfort of this home reaches from the assemblages of stiles, rails, hinges, screws, latches, and weather stripping that is the door—or from the concatenation of belts, switches, motors, and whirling blades that are the fans—out through the extended structures of appropriation, into every pit and plain of the planet's economy.

Not only is comfort the consequent of a massive contrivance, but its ends are not simple, they are not straightforward, they are not direct. For instance, it is the first requirement of true comfort to appear, precisely, uncontrived. The image is invariably that of the mother and father and son and daughter lounging in their comfortably heated living room while outside the snow falls; it is never that of the elaborately concealed system of ducts and pipes, heating machinery, and fuel-storage structures; never that of the oil man coming to fill up the tank for the winter; never that of the still vaster (but no less elaborately concealed) system of pipelines, tank farms, tankers, and oil fields; never that of the political and military machinations (even more carefully concealed) required to keep the oil (or coal or uranium) flowing; *never that of the mother and father working to pay for their part in all this*. Certainly the parents are not portrayed reproducing their culture in their children by insisting, at the door of the room, that *we close the door when the furnace is on*.

Evidently comfort is deeply political, and, beyond the saving achieved by using a wood-burning stove instead of an oil-burning furnace, this is what is acknowledged by a gesture that overtly and self-consciously manifests the extensive labor otherwise obscured: Cutting wood in the back yard for a wood stove is as much a political act as it is exercise. Here, where the house is heated with oil, the parallel is to Denis and Ingrid's refusal to install air conditioning for the summer and their insistence in the winter on keeping the thermostat at 62° during the day and 58° at night. But, whereas the latter shows up in a taste for wearing sweaters indoors, it is the former that causes the mania for opening and closing windows

and doors. There is doubtless in this no minor chord of puritanical austerity (Denis in particular is holier than anybody), but, however this might be, it is immediately complicated by a kind of hedonic commitment to *fresh air*, to air not exclusively theirs, to the smells of wet earth, of honeysuckle and privet, to the sounds of bird and beast and other people (to the sounds of their children playing outside), to the call of a neighbor, to the sounds of the city, to the sort of complex sensation of, on a warm summer evening

scented with linden blossom, hearing a basketball dribbled down the sidewalk by a kid heading home for the night.

None of this, of course, is to deny comfort. It is to complicate it, to make it real, to insist on the inner contradictions that render it slightly bitter even at its sweetest, to insist that it is not something one can have, that it is only something one can be.

By opening and closing doors ... according to the rules.