House of Strangers

Jerry Carroll*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1955 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
House of Strangers

Jerry Carroll

Abstract

JEFF plopped into the kitchen chair and watched his ” mother drop eggs, one by one, into the frying pan. The sizzle of the eggs frying made him more conscious of the heat...
JEFF plopped into the kitchen chair and watched his mother drop eggs, one by one, into the frying pan. The sizzle of the eggs frying made him more conscious of the heat.

The curtains hung limp at the window. No breeze had stirred them since the first of June.

"Pam still on the phone?" His mother turned from the stove and brushed a straggly lock of hair from her face. It was wilted and limp like the curtain.

"Guess so."

"Better tell her lunch is about ready."

"OK." He got up and ambled to the living room where Pam was sitting.

"Pam." She looked up. "Lunch is about ready."

Pam gave Jeff a look which was not exactly anger but yet she appeared irritated.

"I'll be through in a minute."

He turned and shrugged it off. Probably just the heat. Back in the kitchen, he planted himself again in the chair.

Soon, Pam's high-heeled clicking on the linoleum punctuated the silence. It meant that lunch could be served.

"Who called?" Mrs. Douglas was sliding the eggs out of the pan with a pancake turner. "Pam, I'm talking to you." She turned back to the stove. "No one seems to pay any attention when it's hot."

"I'm sorry, Mom, guess I wasn't listening."

"Who called?"

"Oh, it was Janie. She . . . she just wanted to check about the trip to the lake."
“Are you sure you girls want to go now? It’s so hot.”
“We’ve had this trip planned for nearly six months . . . ever since Christmas. After all, I don’t graduate from college every day.”
“Don’t get excited. I just asked you.”
Pam sat at the table, piercing the yolk of the egg, with her fork. “I guess I’m not hungry.”
“Come on, gotta eat even if it’s hot.” Jeff stuffed half a piece of bread in his mouth. He always ate with avarice, no matter what the weather was like.
“What’s the matter? Did Janie tell you some gossip?” He could never understand girls. They always seemed to take great delight in telling you what someone else had said about you. Pam was hurt so easily. He shouldn’t have asked it, but it just slipped out.
“No . . . no, she didn’t say anything.”
“Go on and eat then.”
“Quit telling me what to do. Every one thinks they can run my life for me.” Pam slammed her fork on the table and sat in silence.
“OK, OK, if that’s the way you want to be I’ll . . . ,” his voice trailed off into nothing.
“Mom, when’s Pop coming back?”
“Ought to be back tomorrow. He’s going to call tonight.”
Jeff twisted in his chair and rested an elbow on the table. The fork, which he turned over and over in front of his face, seemed to hold some sort of fascination.
“You know, I’ve been thinking of getting a car.”
“Hah, where would you get money for a car?” His mother smiled and continued to eat.
“Maybe I could borrow the money from Pop.”
“Better wait until your father comes home.”
His mother looked at him with the sly, someday you’ll grow up, look. She couldn’t realize that he was no longer her baby. It had always bothered him. In spite of the closeness that existed between Pam and Jeff, his mother always seemed to interfere. Pam didn’t think her mother really loved her. Jeff felt the same way about his father. Whenever Pam got angry at her mother she always seemed
to like to dwell on the fact. Jeff would then start talking about his father, and it always ended in a stalemate. Pam would be crying and Jeff would walk out of the room slamming the door.

“We'll see.”

“We'll see... we'll see, that's all I ever hear.” He knew he shouldn't have gotten mad. His mother would slip on the hurt expression and be cold to him for the rest of the day. Jeff tried to brighten the situation. “Maybe Sid would go with me when I look at cars.” Pam glared at him, but it was too late. “Damn, why did I have to mention Sid,” he thought.

“Why did you have to bring Sid into this matter? You know how I feel about him.” His mother stopped eating and her face began to flush.

Now both of them would be against him. Pam, because he had brought up the subject and his mother because she hated Sid, just because he was a Jew.

“He's a great guy, Mom. Gee, the other day I was with him when he went to buy a typewriter. You should'a seen the way he Jewed that fellow down.”

Pam's fork hit the table with a resounding smack. Before he could say anything she had darted from the room. She pounded up the steps and her bedroom door slammed shut.

“I didn't mean anything.” His hands chopped the air in front of him. “Anybody could have said it.”

“Pam's so sensitive about it because you mentioned Jew. Maybe she'll get some sense into her head and leave him alone. She can't live with something like that for the rest of her life.”

“I'm going up and talk to her.”

“Leave her alone.” His mother glared at him.

“I didn't...,” he shoved back his chair and stood up.

“Jeff, I told you...,” his mother was still yelling at him as he got to the landing at the top of the steps. He stood in front of Pam's door, debating. Finally he knocked. No answer. He tried again. “Come on, Pam, I want to talk to you.”

He opened the door, closed it and stood motionless,
watching Pam mechanically folding her clothes. She didn't look up.

"Pam ... I . . ."

"There's no need to apologize, Jeff. I think you made yourself clear . . . too clear."

"But I didn't mean anything by it. It just slipped out. I've used that expression for years."

Pam shut the suitcase smartly and began to fill another one. "It's people like you who continue to help the prejudice along."

Jeff walked to the bed and sat down, facing Pam. 

"Thanks, thanks a lot. I don't suppose I've helped you about this Sid matter."

His eyes were burning. Pam and he had always been so close, until Sid. Now she seemed to think of nothing else but Sid. She was always on guard. The merest mention of anti-Semitism always brought a burst of anger.

"I don't think you're so unprejudiced on this Jewish matter yourself. Why do you always mention that his parents are Jewish, but that he doesn't belong to the Church?"

Pam bit her lip. Jeff could tell that he had hit upon something that Pam was trying to hide, even from herself. Tears started running down her face. Soon she was sobbing, but trying to check the sobs so that her mother in the kitchen below would not hear.

"Jeff, I don't know what to do. That telephone call . . . it wasn't Janie, it was Sid. We're going to elope tonight."

Jeff sat stunned as though he couldn't believe her. But her tears betrayed the truth. Probably the thing that hurt him most was the fact that she hadn't intended to tell him.

For a moment he hated Sid. He tried not to blame it on the Jewish matter, but it kept welling in his mind. Pretty funny, he thought, you who try to be so unprejudiced are just as bad as the rest.

At last he mustered enough energy to speak.

"When are you going?" The sounds came out thick and foggy as though he couldn't quite get them out of his throat.

"We're going to be married tonight. Going over the state line where there's no waiting period."
Pam took a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her eyes.

"Are you sure you want this? It's not Mom who's forced you into it, is it?"

"Don't you suppose I've thought of that? I'm happy with Sid. Happier than I've ever been with anyone."

Jeff knew how she felt. He had felt the same way about Mary. They had enjoyed the same things and always felt the same way. When Mary moved away it ended. Letters were no good. They didn't even correspond anymore. He had thought there would be others, but nobody else was Mary.

"Can I help you?"

Pam brightened a little. "Do you think I'm right in doing this?"

"I don't know if you're right or not. It's your decision. Just be sure. Make it last. Don't give Mom the satisfaction of having it fail."

Jeff had never talked about his mother in this way before. It surprised him but made him feel good. She was just another person. Why had he always thought of her as something so different? She could be wrong. He hoped deeply that she was wrong about this marriage.

"Pam, you're not going to tell Mom about this?"

"I can't tell her. Do you think she would let me go through with it?"

"You're twenty-one. She can't stop you."

"But Jeff, I can't. It would just be a scene."

"Can't you see if you don't, you're burning all of your bridges behind you. If something goes wrong . . ."

Pam straightened and set her jaw. "Nothing's going to go wrong."

The way she said it convinced Jeff. If anyone could make the marriage last, she could. He was sure of it now.

"Need any help in packing?"

She smiled. The first time Jeff could remember her really smile since she had gotten home. "No, I'm almost done. I wish you could come with us, but Mom would suspect something."

Jeff wanted to go, but it was impossible. "Sure. I'll stay
home and guard the secret.” He laughed loudly and the sound echoed in the small room. It was a poor mask for his true feelings.

Pam didn’t act as though she noticed. “As soon as I finish with this suitcase, you can carry them all down for me, if you will. Janie’s going to pick me up and take me to meet Sid.”

“OK.” Jeff sat on the bed, twisting his ring around and around his finger.

“Jeff,” she looked him in the eye, “we’ll call you when the ceremony’s over. I want you to be the first to know.”

“Sure.” He didn’t know what difference it made, but if she wanted it . . .

“Ready?” He got up from the bed.

“Ready.”

He carried the bags down to the front door. Pam was still in her room, picking up things and stuffing them in her hand bag.

Jeff could hear his mother, busy in the kitchen, banging some pots in the sink.

“Dishes all wiped, Mom?”

“They’ve been done for nearly half an hour.”

He turned and walked back to the kitchen.

“Is my girl being picked on? No one to wipe the dishes?”

“I’d think someone could help me. I notice the heat just as much as anyone else.” She picked up the strainer from the sink and pounded it against the edge of the waste basket to dislodge all of the particles of food.

“What were you two so quiet about up in the bedroom?”

“Oh Pam . . . ,” he stammered, “was just talking about the rush at school . . . just before graduation.”

His mother looked at him owlishly but turned her back as though she had decided it was no use to question him.

The gravel in the drive crunched as Janie’s blue car stopped close to the door.

“Pam . . . Janie’s here.”

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

Jeff walked to the door and called out to Janie. “Might as well come in. She’s late as usual.”

Janie’s voice came bubbling through the door. “Do you
She came bouncing up the steps and into the room, letting the screen door close with a loud slam.

"Hello, Mrs. Douglas. Isn't this heat awful?"

Jeff couldn't see how it could bother Janie very much, with the clothes she was wearing.

"Oh, I guess I'll live." Mrs. Douglas bent over and put the last pan away in the cupboard.

"Some car you got there." Jeff looked out the window at the shiny new convertible.

"The folks sure went all out for my graduation. I told them it was foolish, but I'm enjoying it. As practical as I try to be... guess I'm just a fake."

She laughed again, the bubbly laugh that was only Janie's.

"You girls be careful up there. The lake is always crowded when the weather is like this. When you called Pam before lunch, I told her that I didn't think you ought to go."

Jeff could feel his jaw stiffen. Would Janie say that she hadn't called? Before he had a chance to say anything she smiled.

"Really, I don't think there's anything to worry about, Mrs. Douglas. The folks will be up tomorrow. We're just going to open up the cabin tonight."

Jeff relaxed. Janie would always come through in a tight situation. Pam had been right in telling her about the elopement.

"Sorry I took so long, but you know me." Pam came rushing into the room.

"It's OK, I was just sitting here enjoying the heat anyway."

Pam glanced at Jeff and he smiled in return. She relaxed, because of Jeff's look of assurance.

Jeff jumped to his feet and walked with the girls to the door. He picked up the two suit cases just as his mother came onto the porch.

"What are you taking so many clothes for? You're only going to be gone four days."

Pam's face flushed a little.
"You never know who we might meet at the lake. Never have too many clothes." Janie smiled at Mrs. Douglas and hopped through the door.

Mrs. Douglas called as the car turned down the drive. "Be careful."

Pam sat staring straight ahead. She hadn't even heard. Jeff stood watching the car until it turned the corner and was hidden by the grove of trees.

He walked back into the house and sat down in the living room where his mother was just picking up the morning paper.

"You know it's sort of a relief that she's going to the lake. At least I won't have to worry about her seeing Sid."

Late in the afternoon, just before dinner, the weather had cooled. A breeze made the kitchen curtain dance against the wall as Jeff helped clear the dishes.

"Good meal, Mom. No one can cook like you do."

She smiled. It was one thing that always pleased her. "Wish your father was here tonight. He always liked cold salmon when the weather was hot."

"He's going to call tonight, huh?"

"Why, yes. Anything the matter?"

"No." Jeff shuffled his feet on the floor. His mother got up from her chair. "I think I'll let the dishes wait. Are you going to do anything tonight?"

"No, got a book from the library. Thought I would just sit home and read."

She walked into the living room. Jeff turned out the light in the kitchen and followed her.

He fumbled at the pages of his book and turned them so that his mother wouldn't notice that he wasn't reading.

Mrs. Douglas placidly read the paper. "The paper says they're going to hold another one of those atomic bomb tests. I still think they're responsible for this weather."

Jeff looked up from the book again. "Mom, they couldn't be."

"I don't care what people say. Ever since the first one was set off, the weather has changed."
Jeff closed the book and let it drop to the floor beside his chair.

"I didn't mean to bother you with your reading."

"That's all right. Can't seem to get interested in reading tonight anyway."

He unlaced his shoes and slipped them off. "Mom."

"Yes?"

"Why don't you like Sid?"

"Jeff, we have been over this so many times."

"But you always give the same reason, just because he's a Jew."

"I think that should be enough reason for anyone." She stiffened her back and picked up the paper again.

"So what?" It's Pam that would have to live with him."

"What are you talking about? Pam live with him . . . why, I wouldn't even let him in the house if I had my way."

Jeff could feel the anger rising in his throat. He tried to control it. He would never be able to talk to his mother about this if he couldn't.

"But Mom . . ."

"After all of the things we have done for her. Bought her nice clothes, sent her to college . . . I think it's all that college's fault. That's where she got all of her liberal ideas."

"But she's in love with him. What if Pop had been Jewish? Do you think it would have made any difference to you?"

"Certainly it would have made a difference. Do you think I ever would have paid any attention to him if he had been a Jew?"

It was the wrong attack. What can you say to a person that's so prejudiced?

"Isn't Pam's happiness important to you? You say you love her, but you certainly don't seem to. All you do is argue with her and make her feel miserable."

"We've never been very close. She always seemed so remote. Ever since you were children. She never seemed to want to be loved, but you always did. I just could never get close to her."

His mother's words echoed in Jeff's brain. All of the arguments with Pam when he had tried to convince her
that she was wrong, that their mother did love her! She had been right all along.

"Mom, Sid and Pam have been talking about getting married."

He could tell from his mother's expression that she had not wanted the subject raised again.

"It doesn't surprise me. She doesn't seem to care anymore what I think."

"But she does. Can't you see that?"

"You can't tell me she cares, if she keeps seeing Sid. I've lain awake nights thinking about it. I've always wanted grandchildren. Do you think that I could stand a Jewish grandchild with a hook nose and black curly hair?" Tears were beginning to form in her eyes. "Well, you've got me crying. I hope you're satisfied."

"Why can't you face facts? You simply can't talk Pam out of this. She's in love with Sid. Can't you understand that?"

"Quit talking to me that way, Jeff. You've never behaved this way before."

"Mom, I've never felt this way before."

"I'm going out to the kitchen and do the dishes." She got up and walked to the kitchen. As she passed, Jeff asked if he could help. "No, I'd rather do them myself."

He picked up the book and tried to read the lines. They were all blurred. He started again and finally gave up, slamming the book shut and throwing it on the floor.

The telephone rang with the peculiar long rings that mark it as long distance. Jeff jumped to his feet but his mother was all ready answering it.

His mother glanced at him. "It's probably your father."

"Pam? What's the matter . . . you weren't in an accident?" His mother paled at the thought. "You're all right? Well, what is it . . . you sound so funny? Yes, Jeff's here. But what's the matter? Pam, tell me. What? You what?" She sank slowly into the chair beside the telephone stand. Her voice became flat. "All right. Good-by."

She sat motionless beside the telephone. Finally she spoke. "They're married." She sat looking as though she couldn't believe it. It was beyond comprehension. "You'll
never do this to me will you, Jeff? Jeff, tell me you won't. You're all I have left."

Jeff had seen his mother cry many times, but this was different. She was practically hysterical.

"Mom . . . I was . . . I wanted to tell you. I couldn't."

His own eyes were beginning to smart.

"You knew. You knew and you didn't tell me." Her eyes were blazing, but they softened.

"It wouldn't have done any good."

His mother stopped crying. She looked at Jeff. It seemed as though his mother was looking through him. The penetrating gaze was almost unbearable.

"I'll never have to worry about you, Jeff. You've got sense. Pam and I never did get along. She just did this to spite me. Well, I hope she will be happy. I never want to see her again."

"Mom, you can't! She's your own daughter."

She sat still, staring. "She made up her own mind." Her voice was flat and expressionless. "I still have you. You'll never do anything like this."

The smile on her face chilled Jeff. He wanted to run . . . to get away from her. Everything was out of order. His head ached. What is she, some kind of monster? My mother, my own mother. I've always trusted you . . . always turned to you. Now you've taken that all away. How can I ever live with you again?

He tried to move, but he felt glued to the spot. As though it were all a bad dream. All he could see was his mother. His mother smiling at him.

"Mom . . . I . . ." He took one step toward her and then turned and ran to the living room. Tears were streaming down his face. As he ran up the steps, he could hear his mother calling, "Jeff."

He slammed his bedroom door and stood in the room gasping for breath. Everything seemed changed. Even his room looked strange. He was a stranger in a house of strangers. It would never be the same again.

— Jerry Carroll, Eng. '55