

The Teacher

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It was the girls who first brought him here. I call them “girls” because of their girlish temperaments, though they were almost middle-aged. Maeve was by far the more emotional of the two, with a habit of turning her pale-blue eyes upward like a saint or a martyr. Betty was sturdier, with a square muscular body to anchor them both. They shared an old house in the town, one of those run-down, peeling places that smell of mold inside. During the two or three years I had known them, their goodness had made them take up several needy causes in the town: pregnant teens, abandoned families, boys caught stealing for drugs. One time, they sheltered a suspected sex offender, which made them very unpopular; when he turned out to be guilty, they remained unrepentant, unshaken in the faith that they had done the right thing.

They worked at home to make their living. Maeve typed documents on a computer; Betty read manuscripts for a publisher. That was how they had first met Dr. Chacko, by way of his manuscript, which he had submitted for publication. Betty’s own publisher had been too conventional to understand it, and so had several others she had tried. She decided that the appearance of the manuscript may have been at fault—it seemed to be the product of a very old typewriter, with some letters too faded to read. So, in her spare time, Maeve had copied the entire work onto her computer; it was more than seven hundred pages when printed out, but she was as inspired as Betty, and it became their cause, along with Dr. Chacko himself.

They tried to explain his work to me, and it made them laugh that I didn’t understand it. It was so simple, they said—it was life itself, life and death—which I said didn’t sound all that simple to me. For them, they admitted, it was not the work but Dr. Chacko himself who was difficult to understand. But wasn’t it always like that, with rare human beings? They tried to describe him to me, but they couldn’t even say what nationality he was. They had taken him for an Italian, a Sicilian, until they discovered that he was partly Indian, the name Chacko coming from a Syrian Christian community in the south of India. They thought he was also partly Russian—or had he only lived in Russia? He had travelled to many distant places, but it was in England that he had started his first workshop. This had been dissolved, and so had some subsequent ones elsewhere; now they had high hopes for the workshop they had helped him start in New York City, about two hours away from our town upstate.

In the meantime, they were searching for a suitable place for him to live. Accommodation had been found in a partly converted loft in the city, but he longed for trees, open sky, water, if possible, and so, for his sake, did the girls. I knew what they had in mind. I lived by myself in my house; it was set in several acres of ground and had a separate cottage, which was unoccupied. The girls knew that I had been left alone here after ten years of what I had considered a satisfactory marriage, and in proposing Dr. Chacko for my cottage they were also hoping, I suspected, to relieve my loneliness. What they didn’t know was that solitude had come to seem natural and pleasant to me. Of course, it had been

different once, when my husband and I came here only at weekends with carloads of guests. That was before a cluster of modest homes had been built up to the back of the property—not for visitors from the city but for residents with jobs in the town, which itself had crept closer, with a diner and a Realtor's office. The place was no longer such a getaway for the people who had been our friends, and maybe still were his and his young wife's.

I'm not sure now why I agreed to let Dr. Chacko move into the cottage. I have a memory of him riding past on his bicycle, but it has merged with so many later memories of him and his bicycle. It was a very old model, held together here and there with string, and not quite big enough for him, so that it wobbled as he rode. I think it was this sight—of a thin gray-haired man mounted on an inadequate nag—that made me give in. He moved in the same afternoon. I had been using the cottage as a sort of storage dump, so there were some old pieces of furniture in there, which the girls helped him rearrange. Afterward, they came up to the house to assure me that I had done a good deed for which I would receive great reward. I assumed they meant that Dr. Chacko's proximity itself would be rewarding. But I had already begun to worry that he might visit me more often than I wished, and try to impose his philosophy or his mission on me, or whatever it was that had made the girls admire him so extravagantly.

This fear turned out to be unfounded. I saw him only when he rode past the house on his bicycle, presumably on his way to the train station. The girls had told me that the members of the workshop in the city paid his fare, plus a small fee. That appeared to be his only source of income while everyone waited for his manuscript to be published and make him famous. Meanwhile, the girls brought meals for him every day in little covered dishes, waving to me as they drove past in their pickup. So his presence really should not have disturbed me—except that it did. Maybe because I had grown used to being alone on the property, or because the thought of him working in the cottage, as the girls told me he did, refining and extending his ideas, gave the place a sort of potency. It was at some distance from the house and shielded from it by a mass of old trees, but the fact that it was invisible only increased its hold on my imagination.

I drove myself to the city to attend one of his workshops. New York held too many memories of the life I used to live, so the only times I went there now were to visit my doctor or to have my hair done. However, the place for which I was bound was unlike any I had known before. The house was in midtown, in a row of brownstones from the eighteen-seventies, now run-down and in the last stage of their existence. The only signs of life were here and there an air-conditioner dripping into the street or a window box planted with modest flowers that had not flourished. The house, when I found it, seemed to have lost all its tenants, for there was only one name beside the cluster of bells. I had to press it twice before a woman came down to open the door. She informed me that Dr. Chacko had already begun his work. Cutting my apology short, she sold me a fifteen-dollar ticket and told me to follow her. The stairs were worn and steep, but it was not too long a climb before she opened a door and ushered me inside.

There were about twenty people in the small room, more women than men. Most of them were squatting on the floor, but I was given a folding chair beside two elderly women and a cripple. With so many people crowded together, the room was very hot and the air somewhat fetid—partly, perhaps, because of the indifference to health and hygiene of those who have gone beyond worldly satisfactions. The women there reminded me of Betty and Maeve: the same age, the same homespun dresses, with their hair in a fringe or a bun, and also, shining under this plain appearance, the same glow of aspiration. This was shared even by the one young person there, a teen-age girl with long, unkempt blond hair, who kept her eyes upturned in the same way as Maeve. What was he telling them that left everyone so breathless? He spoke for several stretches of five or ten minutes, and when he paused they all shut their eyes to concentrate. Afterward, he asked them to explain what they had understood. Some of them seemed to have understood more than others. The blond girl had got it all wrong, and laughed along with the rest at having her error exposed; and the cripple had understood so well that he went into a lengthy exegesis that made Dr. Chacko invite him to take charge of the class. This, too, made everyone laugh—altogether there was a friendly atmosphere emanating from Dr. Chacko himself, who behaved the way a very good teacher does with his favorite students. Although some of the people there may not have found it easy to spare the fifteen-dollar entrance fee, they all contributed another four dollars for the mug of herbal tea and the cookie that allowed them to stay in his presence for a half hour longer. I couldn't help feeling out of place, partly because I had kept my shoes on, my high-heeled summer sandals, while everyone else's had been left in a heap outside the door—like those of pilgrims who had walked many dusty miles to reach their destination.

Dr. Chacko accepted my offer of a ride back home. He was asleep for most of the drive, slumped in the front seat with his legs stretched out as far as they would go. From time to time, he woke up briefly, not to talk but to sing snatches of song, gesturing with one hand as though scooping up some beautiful melody that hovered above him. When I asked him what it was that he was singing, his answer was to linger around a particularly lovely passage, making me a gift of it.

I didn't see him again for a few weeks. Then one day, at the height of the summer, I literally almost stumbled across him. I had spent the day in my air-conditioned house and had ventured out only into the evening air, when the sky was veiled in its dying light and the remains of a yellowed heat-haze. It was almost eight o'clock, but even the birds were still stirring uncomfortably, like restless sleepers, in their nests. It was while looking up at these restless birds in a tree that I stumbled on Dr. Chacko, who was lying beneath it. I had a shock, but he did not. He remained stretched out full-length, with his arms under his head. "It's cool here," he said. "Cool and beautiful." And he patted the ground beside him for me to join him.

Well, he was not young, and neither was I, and I should have thought nothing of it. And, actually, when I did lie down there was no awkwardness. Like him, I looked up into the roof of leaves; though thick, it had holes in it to let in what from our position looked not like a heat-exhausted sky but like stretches of pure cool silver. Dr. Chacko and I lay side by side, both of us gazing upward with the innocent pleasure of children or even angels—he seemed to be thinking more of the latter, for he said, "Yes, this is my evening paradise." When he added, "Especially after a day like we've had," I realized that he was

referring not to my day in my air-conditioned house but to his in the cottage, where there wasn't even a fan.

I didn't stay long under the tree but went home to search out a table fan for him. At first, I thought of going back to the tree with it, but I felt shy or embarrassed to do so, in case my return should be misinterpreted. (By whom? By him? Or, more likely, by myself?) Instead, I waited for the girls to take it to him the next day. They thanked me so profusely that I realized that they were grateful less for the fan than for what they took as a sign of my increased admiration for him.

They hadn't yet succeeded in placing his manuscript, and they had now decided that the only way forward was to publish it themselves. They had brought me a copy of it, together with a flyer they had put together to send to people who might be able to afford a limited edition of the book; and, since there weren't many of these in their own acquaintance, they had come to ask me for a list of possible subscribers. This request made, the girls went to deliver their little cooked dishes before they grew cold. I took out my old address book, which was full of names I had expected never to need again. And when I saw those names and thought of the life I had lived for so many years—the fund-raiser banquets in hotel ballrooms, the catered dinners, and the ladies' lunches—and then looked at the handbill designed on Maeve's computer, with a passport-like photograph of Dr. Chacko, I was struck by the incompatibility of that past with this present. At the same time, I couldn't help being amused by the idea of those people—or their social secretaries—receiving this flyer, and discarding it in the wastebasket, along with all the other crazy mail. And, if they were actually to read the text, what would they make of it? No more than I could. Here I stopped transcribing names to leaf through the manuscript itself, in the hope of gaining some glimmer of understanding. There was none; it remained turgid and incomprehensible to me and in no way reflected the man I had seen lying indolently under a tree.

I put the list in an envelope with a note to say that I hoped it would be useful to him.

I knocked on his door and, receiving no answer, pushed it open. The cottage was empty, not only of him but of any presence whatsoever: there was nothing except my abandoned furniture and the fan I had given him—no photographs, no pictures, nothing personal. I put the envelope on the table and left quickly, as though I were doing something underhanded.

My instinct turned out to be correct: the next day, Betty came to see me, looking grave and holding the list in her hand. "Where's Maeve?" I asked, for it was unusual for one to come without the other. Betty smiled at me, though sadly: "Maeve is as grateful to you as I am, for the list, but she's hurt. She so loves to do things for him. Sometimes at night she makes me drive her here, just so she can leave a little gift for him."

I said, "And now she's hurt because the gift of the list was mine and not hers?"

“Poor Maeve, her heart’s too full of love. She’s an orphan, you know. She was found on the steps of one of the Sister Marie-Jo Homes. She has no idea who left her there. And, after the orphanage, foster homes. I won’t tell you about those—why should you hear such things. . . . Maeve has these strong feelings. Maybe they’re wrong; probably they are. What she’s always loved best is to leave anonymous gifts for him. It was the sweetest thought for her that he wouldn’t know—”

“That you were helping him with the manuscript?”

“But now he does know. He’s seen your list, so he knows we’re looking for subscribers.”

She appeared to accept my apology, but from that time on something changed between me and the girls. This was true principally of Maeve, who seemed no longer quite to trust me—or was it that she didn’t trust me with him? It was that same day that I entered into a new relationship with Dr. Chacko. For the first time, he came to the porch where I sat with my evening drink. When I invited him to join me, he did so at once. He settled into a chair, and when I offered him a lemonade he indicated my silver cocktail shaker. I told him what was in it, and he said he’d have that. It was quite a potent Martini, but it seemed nothing new to him. After taking a sip, he thanked me for the list I had compiled.

“Are you looking forward to having the book published?” I asked.

He made a vague gesture—of an indifference that seemed to express something of his personality. I asked, “Don’t you think it ought to be published?”

“What do you think?”

He had turned fully toward me. If he was, as I had been told, part Indian and part Russian, I couldn’t see anything to suggest either. He was too dark to be Anglo-Saxon, and his teeth were very strong and white, the most alive thing in his lean face. He spoke English fluently—more than fluently. Under the layers acquired through much moving around in the world, there remained—like a canal still flowing in the oldest part of a city—the flat accent of the English Midlands. I had noticed this at his workshop, where he had deliberately stressed it—as though its homely and provincial sound would bring his message closer to the earth.

When he felt that he had waited long enough for my opinion of his manuscript, he interpreted my silence as unfavorable. He admitted that it was hard labor for him to write, like birth pangs: “Thoughts trying to get themselves born—except I don’t have many thoughts.”

He laughed with those magnificent teeth, at himself and at me, as if I might not believe him. But I did believe him. I’d seen him at his workshop, where he seemed to operate not through thoughts or words or ideas but just by being as he was.

Over the course of that summer, he joined me several more times for drinks on the porch. When the season changed, we sat by the fireplace in my living room, and we carried on this practice throughout that year and the beginning of the next. But it wasn't until the second summer that he joined me for a meal. Unlike the girls, and probably many others who attended his workshop, he wasn't a vegetarian. He thoroughly enjoyed a veal cutlet, and the wine we drank with it; also the candles in my silver candelabra and their reflection on the mahogany table.

Even on the days when he ate with me, I saw the girls going to the cottage with their covered dishes. At the end of one of our meals, I asked him what he did, on such nights, with the food they had cooked for him. He said that he ate it. "If I didn't," he explained, "they'd discover it the next day when they come to bring more. It's their kind nature. There's nothing I can do about it."

One evening, finding the cottage empty, they came up to the house to see if I knew where he was. At first, we didn't notice them, standing silently in the doorway, holding their dishes, but, as soon as we did, he took charge like a good host. He drew out chairs for them; he gestured toward the table: "There are some wicked things here that you won't want, but what if?"—he turned to me—"two more plates, would it be possible?" And it was he who uncovered their dishes and served them. "What delicious smells, and may I?" He dipped in a fork and, tasting, confirmed that the food was, indeed, delicious. Despite all this, he didn't quite succeed in overcoming my embarrassment and whatever were their much stronger feelings. After a while, I managed to contribute some small talk, and so did Betty, both of us halfheartedly. As for Maeve, she just stared down at her plate, trying, perhaps, to hide the tears that were trickling into her untouched food.

Later that summer, Betty told me that my list of potential subscribers had proved useless. Now she had a new suggestion, which was that I should underwrite the publication of the manuscript. She made it sound like a good business proposition, pointing out that in no time royalties would be coming in, whereupon I would be the first person to be reimbursed. Maeve didn't say anything; she only traced her toe over the floor, looking down at it so as not to see my face or let me see hers. This was Maeve's way with me now; and on subsequent visits, while Betty and I went over the details of the publication, Maeve always wandered off outside by herself, making it clear that she wanted no part of any discussion with me.

During these warm months, my evening walk sometimes took me as far as the waterfall at the edge of my property. The precipitous climb to the rock from which it fell was no longer easy for me, but I enjoyed the solitude there, the moss-covered stones, the trees bending toward the arc of the water. One day, I saw a figure within that arc, sheathed in its iridescence and turning in its spray: it was Dr. Chacko, naked and singing as he soaped himself. His towel and a pair of rubber flip-flops lay on a rocky ledge far enough away not to get wet. Before I could leave, he emerged, still singing and naked; if he saw me, he gave no sign of it until he had reached his towel and wrapped it around himself.

Nimbly, on bare feet, carrying his shoes, he climbed the rocks that separated us and sat down beside me, drops still sparkling on his thighs and his chest. As far as I could make out over the roar of the

water, he was telling me how much he enjoyed coming here for his shower—though, of course, he didn't feel the same way in the winter. Was he intending to spend another winter with us? I wondered then. By "us," I meant those of us who were united in our care of him, except that now, apparently, I stood accused of having taken more than my fair share. It was so ridiculous! And, seemingly prompted by the same thought, he said that very word—"Ridiculous"—as we got up to walk together toward the house. "But it's always happening," he went on, "and it's always my fault. I should have told them. Why wouldn't I have told them? There's nothing wrong in it."

"You mean in eating meat?"

"And in your being my friend. Careful." He lifted a prickly branch nodding over our narrow path. I hadn't mentioned Maeve, but, in the way he had of taking up one's unspoken thoughts, he continued, "It's sad that she's an orphan, but there are some orphans who grow up quite happy and carefree. When I was younger, very young, I used to look in the mirror: 'Who is this?' I didn't even know my real name—Chacko comes from the parents who adopted me for a while. They were Indian, but they lived in the U.K., in a very dull town, and at seventeen I made my way elsewhere. I'd been reading the old Russian authors, and I thought all Russians were saints or swindlers, but when I went there I found no one like that; so I worked my way to Baku, and from there farther east. . . . A long story, a long odyssey."

He didn't tell me any more of it that day (or any other day, now that I come to think of it). Instead, he plucked one of his melodies out of the air, some strange tune from far away.

He did stay through the winter, and through the spring, and then another year had passed and it was summer again. In the meantime, Betty had seen his book through production and had made it into a very handsome volume. She watched me examining it, while Maeve stood by, gazing at her own toe circling the carpet. That evening, I sat down seriously with the book, but I still understood very little; actually, nothing.

Carrying the book, I went to see him the next morning. He was sitting on the doorstep of the cottage, carving a piece of wood. He invited me to sit beside him, and when I did I had again that feeling of intimacy I'd had lying next to him under the tree. An innocent intimacy, enhanced by the way he was carving, like a boy whittling a stick. He told me that woodwork was just a hobby for him now, but once it had been useful—when he had fixed shelves and done minor repairs. It was his only skill, he said, since he hadn't had much education. Then I did ask about the book, pointing at the title page, where his name was printed—with "Ph.D." attached to it.

"I bought it," he said. "Not actually I, but a lady who liked to hear me talk. There's a small college in India that sells Ph.D.s. B.A.s and M.A.s, too, if that's all you want. . . . It never earned me a living. For that I had to do other things—when I really needed money, for my wife and kids." He was silent for a while, and so was I. Then he went on, "Three of them, all grown up now. I miss them, but they're doing all right. A couple of them are married. They may already have children of their own. I miss my

wife, too, occasionally. She's with someone else now. I liked her—I still do, though she never understood a word of anything I said or wrote. . . . Do you?" he asked me, but I didn't have to answer, for he had opened the book and was leafing through it, reading a sentence here and there as if he had never seen it before. Then he shook his head and laughed. He had a rather whinnying laugh, like a horse; I liked his singing better. "Probably only God knows what it's all about. . . . But there are others—others," he said, and just then the girls' car drew up, "who think it's me who understands, and so I must be God." He whinnied again, and waved at them, and Betty waved back. But Maeve was looking at me—at where I sat close beside him on the narrow doorstep; and from that day her hostility toward me entered a new phase.

There were days of such unpleasant heat that summer that it became impossible, Betty told me, to continue the workshop in its present quarters. She proposed a solution. The first part of her solution consisted of taking a collection from the members to hire a bus to bring them to the country. The second part involved me, or, rather, my grounds, where the workshop was to be held. "They needn't come in the house at all," Betty promised, adding, in her truthful way, "except to use the toilet. They'll sit under the trees—he'll talk to them—and they'll be happy, peaceful."

And that was more or less how it happened. They arrived in the late afternoon and fanned out for a while, admiring the flowering trees, breathing in the fragrant air. By the time he came out to talk to them, the shadows were long and cool. He had them sit under one of the trees, the same one beneath which he often lay, looking up into the leaves. They looked only at him—though without the intensity I had sensed in that rented room where they were squashed close together. Now each had space to breathe, to inhale his message. I watched from the porch. For me, there was something almost legendary about the scene—the earnest seekers gathered around their teacher, drawing inspiration from him and from their surroundings. Lively households rustled and stirred within the trees. A chipmunk scurried across the path with a nut in its mouth. And, as the sun contracted, a deer came out of the distant woods and stood, shy but fearless, against a sky that was partly rose-tinted and partly gold. Everyone was, as Betty had predicted, peaceful, serene. No one seemed to be aware that Maeve had got up from the group and was circling it, the way a wasp would.

They didn't come again. The workshops resumed in New York, but not for long. I learned about the great upheaval only by piecing it together from Betty's reluctant account. Still, it was easy to imagine how, in that cramped and overcrowded room, simmering in the dog-day heat, the smallest spark could have caused an explosion. Betty admitted that she had known from early that morning that Maeve was not herself. Or, rather, that it was one of the days when she was only part of herself, the part that childhood trauma had drained of her natural sweetness. Betty had tried to dissuade her from going, but Maeve had insisted, with that stubborn, closed face that I had begun to think characteristic of her. Betty had settled her on a chair among the disabled, but it was only a few moments into the lecture that Maeve began her disturbance. At first, all she shouted was "No!" Then "Lies! Lies and fakery!" Maybe if Betty had succeeded in removing her at this stage the others might have settled back into their concentration. But, wedged between people on the floor, Betty couldn't reach her, and Maeve spun further out of control, shouting, "Ask him! Why doesn't anyone ask him!" Disconcerted by these wild

shouts, the disciples turned their attention from their teacher to Maeve. Jerked out of a deep tranquillity, they reacted in shock and frustration. And Maeve worked them up, along with herself. “Ask him!” she shouted. “Ask him about the one he drinks with—and eats meat!” Then the room erupted. The cripple raised his crutch at her; others tried to pull her off her chair. By the time Betty managed to reach her, her frock was torn at the shoulder. She struggled against Betty, too—maybe she didn’t recognize her, confused her with the rest; although, Betty admitted, Maeve had sometimes fought against her in this way in the past. Betty put her arms around her to lead her out. Halfway down the stairs, Maeve was still struggling to free herself, sobbing and yelling, “Ask him what else he does with her!” No one followed them; the door upstairs was shut against them while the lecture continued.

The girls no longer brought covered dishes for him, and he no longer cycled to the station for the train to New York. This made me suspect that the ugly uproar may have caused a split among the members; or perhaps he himself, for reasons of his own, had terminated the workshop, like those in England and in other places. I realized that this idea had always been at the back of my mind: that everything in his life was transient.

Now, on my evening walks, I didn’t stumble over him under his tree, because I knew to expect him there; I never lay down with him again, but I sat beside him and we talked a bit. Strangely, I had become more shy with him than before. I even hesitated now to invite him in for a meal.

One day, Betty drove up to my house. She had brought all the unsold copies of Dr. Chacko’s book, which was almost the entire edition. Only a few copies had been bought by some workshop students who had managed to come up with the price; efforts to place them on consignment in bookstores had been unsuccessful. “Where shall I put them?” Betty asked, staggering with armfuls of them up the steps of the porch. It’s not easy to accommodate more than five hundred books without prior arrangement, so they had to be piled on chairs, sofas, tables, wherever there was a surface. I helped her carry them in, and, when we had finished, she accepted a fresh lemonade. As she relaxed a little, I ventured to ask about Maeve.

Her face softened, as it always did at mention of Maeve. “We’re past the worst of it, thank the Lord. . . . Put yourself in her place—someone who’s been betrayed so bitterly in the past.”

I said, “I suppose everyone has been, at some point in their past.” This was as far as I ever went in speaking to her about mine.

Anyway, it wasn’t me she wanted to talk about. “Maeve loved and trusted him, and shouldn’t have. What do we know about him? Only what he’s told us. Are you going to let him stay in the cottage?”

I said, “He’s no trouble to me.”

She clamped her lips tight for a moment before continuing: “Not that I listen to gossip, but they say he was in prison in Bangkok for two years before being deported. But people will say anything, so who

knows what to believe or not to believe. . . . Well, thanks for the lemonade—it was a real treat on a day like this.”

“And thank you for the books.”

“Oh, no. Those are yours. You paid for them.”

That day, I overcame my embarrassment, or whatever it was that had prevented me from inviting him to dinner. He laughed when he saw his books piled around the house. He said, “It looks like I’ve really taken you over here.” But that was untrue—he had never encroached on me or asked for anything.

Since my table and chairs were occupied, we sat on the porch with plates on our laps and glasses at our feet. For the first time, I asked him about the workshop. He said, “People move on. I move on, too.” As he did so often, he answered my question before I had asked it. “There’s always somewhere. One gets used to it.”

I said, “But wouldn’t you rather stay?”

“If there are people who wish me to stay.”

Evidently, he didn’t intend to continue this conversation, and I also realized that there was no need. It was cool outside now, in the night air. Glowworms glittered below, stars above. Instead of talking, he began to hum one of his songs. Was this his teaching? To say nothing? To want and need nothing? All the same, I couldn’t help myself—I had to ask. “So you think you won’t want the cottage much longer?”

He stopped humming. “Why? Are you looking for a new tenant? If so, I hope he’ll pay you better than I.”

“You’re not my tenant.”

“No, of course not. Tenants pay rent. But I should do something for you. Look at this,” and he held up an early autumn leaf that had fluttered onto the porch. “You won’t be able to sit out here much longer—with luck, another month—and after that you’ll need your chairs and tables back. You’ll have to get rid of the books. They’re useless, anyway, if you don’t understand them.”

“One day I shall.”

“And till then? Are you going to eat and sleep with them? I tell you what I’ll do. I’ll build some shelves for them, so that they won’t be in your way, and you can have your house back.”

Did he mean my house or the cottage? I couldn't ask again, and he just went on talking about the shelves and how we would need to buy wood—good quality, he said, to go with the rest of the house.

He came to take measurements, and then we drove to a building-supply depot in town. He filled two huge shopping carts, and, when it came time to pay, he wouldn't let me sign my credit-card slip before he had checked the amounts. The next day, he set up the trestle table we had bought under a tree, and there he worked with his shirt off, and singing. I carried out sandwiches at lunchtime, and we ate them under the tree. The air was filled with the scent of sawdust, of grass, and of the wilted leaves that had begun to fall, and also the whiff of perspiration rising from the tangled hair on his bare chest. It was the last, the very last days of summer, with dusty, drooping trees, and flowers going to seed, and flying insects fierce in their final throes.

I was eager to pay him for his work, and, while I was still wondering how to raise the subject, he presented me with a bill. He had itemized the hours he had spent working for me so far, and it came to a substantial amount. But, anyway, whatever I paid was worth it for me. I continued to make sandwiches for his lunch and to join him in eating them. More and more leaves had begun to fall, some on his naked back, and some scattered in his hair, where they remained like Bacchanalian vine leaves. Sometimes a stronger breeze brought down a shower of them which fell on both of us, veiling us in gold.

One day, he said, "Betty came to ask when I would be moving out of the cottage."

"What did you say?"

"I said I have a job to finish here."

Several days of rain followed, and since he could no longer work outdoors we carried the shelves into the house. The woodwork was almost finished, and he had begun to varnish and polish. As I realized that the work was drawing to a close, I thought up more jobs for him: a spice rack in the kitchen, towel rails in the laundry room. I kept on finding things I needed to have done around the house, including some that I didn't need at all.

When I had almost run out of ideas, he himself had a suggestion. He said that it made him uneasy to see my silver so insecure in the breakfront, where any intruder could smash the glass. In the dining room, there was a niche large enough, he told me, for a cabinet that he could build for me, with a lock to secure my silver inside. We went out to buy more wood, and he set to work at once. He explained the kind of lock he needed, and as I drove to the store I thought that maybe it was not only I but he, too, who was trying to prolong his stay—if, that is, he intended to stay.

On my way back, I drove past the girls' house. It was wide open, windows and doors flowing out into the front yard. It was full of toys, and playing with them were the usual children the girls gathered up from the town—orphans, or fugitives from bad homes. The girls had set up a swing, and Maeve was

sitting on it, shouting “Higher!” while two laughing children pushed her. Betty saw me in my car and waved and called, “Isn’t this fun!”

But, when she came over to talk to me through the car window, the first thing she said was “Is he still in the cottage?”

“He’s working on my bookshelves.”

“If he’s working for you, why don’t you let him stay in the house? There’s plenty of room for the two of you. He hardly needs a whole cottage to himself.”

“Then who else would stay there?”

“You’ve seen our kids—how happy they are just in the few inches of space we have for them. At your place, in that air, those trees—and the seasons! Rain and wind and snow! Beautiful.”

I started the car, and, when I revved the engine, she had to talk louder: “It’s not good for people to stay alone. I know what I was before I met Maeve, and I know what she was, but together—” Here she shouted after the moving car. “The two of us together, that’s a life!”

The cabinet took longer than the other jobs he had done for me. He became so involved in the work that he continued after our supper and after I had gone to bed. I listened to him hammering downstairs, and one night I got up to see how he was getting on. He was fitting in the shelves, but he seemed dissatisfied and took them out again to plane them. I stood silently watching him. When he turned around, he looked at me in the doorway, in my long nightdress, which was of delicate silk, fit for a bride. I remembered the thoughts that Betty had tried to put in my head—had actually put there—and the possibility that he could read them, as he so often could, both embarrassed and excited me. I went back upstairs and continued to lie in bed listening to his hammering. When it stopped, I heard him moving around downstairs and wondered what he was doing. I wanted to go and see for myself. But the same embarrassment overcame me, and I stayed in bed listening, and that, too, was nice, to hear him moving inside my house.

When I woke in the morning, the sun was pouring a sea of sparkling autumn light into the room. I put on a robe and tied it as I hurried down the stairs, thinking that I might still find him there. But he had gone. He had completed his work and swept up the wood shavings, and altogether left everything neat. The cabinet was finished; it sat in its niche. The lock was on, so I knew that he had moved the silver inside and locked it up for security. One of his books was lying on the dining table with a note on it that said, “See page 420.” I opened it to that page and found the key inside. I scanned the page to see if there was a secret message for me in the text, but there was not. I read it again, but still detected no message. I tried the preceding page and the following one, with the same result. But the key was definitely there. I unlocked the new cabinet and found that I had been mistaken. He had not yet moved

the silver inside. But the breakfront was empty, and so were the drawers in my sideboard, in which I had kept my silverware.

The cottage, too, was empty and had been swept with a broom, which he had left leaning against the wall. The only thing missing here was the table fan. The first thing I wondered was how he had managed to transport everything on that rickety mount of his. I imagined him fastening the fan to the bike, then, like a real burglar, slinging the silver in a sack over his shoulder, and standing at dawn on the highway to thumb a ride from a long-distance truck on its way to some far-off, unknown, undiscoverable destination.

The girls soon transformed the cottage into a playroom. The children painted fantastic murals of jungle animals and spaceships; Betty baked cookies while Maeve wove a rug on a loom, which had stood unused in the attic of their old house. As for me, I've been studying his book. I start at the beginning and read right through to the end; then, in the hope of understanding more, I go back and repeat the process. Maybe this is what he had in mind for me, in return for what he took. The loss of my silver may not be a loss at all, but simply the fee charged for my education. Sometimes, though not always, I think that it was worth it. Meanwhile, as Betty anticipated, each season here brings us its own joys: ghosts in bedsheets at Halloween, stars and angels on the Christmas tree, and, in the depths of winter, when the snow has fallen thick and fast, toboggans flying down the slope behind the cottage and into the hollow that in the spring will be covered with new grass and sprinkled with small flowers, bluebells and forget-me-nots. ♦

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