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The Caretakers

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The Caretakers

Scott should have known they were in for a strange summer the minute he and Donna arrived at the house in California. “Who would paint a house flamingo pink?” Donna had said.

But they were bedazzled. As soon as the owner of the house left in the airport shuttle van, Donna whirled around the enormous living room, giggling. Scott caught her and said he wanted to squeeze the stuffing out of her.

“Can you believe this?” she cried in a loud whisper. “Ours for the whole summer!”

“You don’t have to whisper!” He pinched her mouth shut, then kissed her, but she jerked away from him.

Their marriage was in a forlorn state. Since Scott was laid off from Harmony Tech Industries six months ago, they had grown irritated with each other. She was touchy and distrustful of him. They had been scraping by on Donna’s half-time job at a chain drugstore in Kentucky, and they were behind on the mortgage of their dinky wood-frame house. But now by some miracle they had been hired as caretakers of a snazzy hacienda in the San Gabriel Mountains while the owners traipsed around Italy all summer. Scott and Donna were responsible for the upkeep of the house, the lawn (including shrubbery), the swimming pool, and a vegetable garden. There was also a small ginger dog named Slingshot, who came with a set of precise directions, like a recipe.

Scott’s cousin Terry had arranged the deal. Terry had lived in California for ten years, and the owner’s wife was her yoga instructor. To save money, Scott and Donna drove straight from Kentucky to California, stopping for only one night at a motel. Somewhere in the desert, Scott said to Donna, “I’ve always believed there was something out West meant for me, but I never thought I’d get there. Now—”

“You’ll find it,” she said, snapping a pretzel. “It’ll have your name on it.”

The L.A. freeways had them going in circles, causing them to arrive two hours later than promised. The owner was in a hurry to leave for the airport, and his wife, the yoga instructor, had gone earlier under some circumstances that he did not explain clearly. He was a small nervous man, chalky pale, wearing a caterpillar-green leisure suit. The airport shuttle arrived as he was giving them a slapdash tour.

“It’s all yours,” he said, hastening to board the van. “Water the plants, eat anything you like, and don’t let the coyotes get the dog. I left notes everywhere—how to operate things and what to do with the dog if you have to leave before I get back. Any questions, just e-mail.”

As the van drove away, Donna said, “He was beady-eyed—like the weatherman on Channel 10.”

“We’re in California now,” said Scott.

The house was cool and hard, with archways and giant windows, lush plantings and hiding places. It was fairly bare. One room contained only a hassock.

“I’m liable to get lost,” Donna said. “It’s too big for two people.”

“Ha. If we had their money, you wouldn’t know when to stop.”

“I’d at least buy some furniture.”

A redwood barn, almost as large as the house, held a smorgasbord of tools and vehicles—three cars, a tractor, a riding mower, pool equipment, even a pair of snowmobiles and a boat. The showpiece was the Bobcat, a miniature bulldozer about the size of a baby elephant.

“Yee-haw!” cried Scott. “Come to Papa.”

While Donna fussed over the patio plants, muttering to herself, Scott rode the Bobcat around, imagining it as a tank crunching the sands of Afghanistan. Evidently the Bobcat had been essential for maneuvering into place the immense stones of the patio and the barbecue pit. “I’m a do-it-yourselfer,” the owner had commented.

In a couple of days, after they had settled in, Scott began using the Bobcat to hoist rocks from a pile of large stones over to a wide span of dirt. Exuberant, he began ordering them into a circle, like a druid thing he had seen on the Discovery Channel. After setting one of the larger stones, he dismounted and called to Donna, who was gathering vegetables. She removed her floppy garden hat and fanned her face with it as she approached.

“I want to show you something,” he said. The Bobcat was parked on a concrete slab. “Look at these footprints.”

A perfect set of cat prints crossed a scored square of concrete. Donna crouched, tracing her finger in the footprints. “Poor kitty, walking through wet cement,” she said.

“And look,” said Scott. “The cat turns around and retraces his steps. See, the tracks go in both directions. He steps right smack into his own tracks.”

“But they suddenly end,” Donna said.

“You sound sad.”

“Do I? I wonder why.”

In the sun, Scott could see clearly the place on her scalp where he had hit her with her vanity mirror two months ago. He hadn't meant to do it, but after that, something was gone between them. He touched the spot, but she did not flinch. She was still running her fingers over the grooves of the cat tracks. Sometimes he felt two inches tall, an idiot, but now he fancied that he was courting her anew, impressing her with this luxury joint, as if he had produced it himself.

“When you were slinging those rocks around, you looked like a cat hauling her kittens around by the scruff of the neck,” she said, standing up. She was wearing a little pink polka-dotted dress that barely covered her butt. He had never seen her in that dress before. He whistled a cat-call, and she sashayed toward the house.

With the garden, the citrus trees, and the overstocked pantry, they lived in daredevil abundance. Donna served artichoke tortellini with sun-dried tomatoes and almonds, smoked trout, chocolate-covered figs. Scott grilled bison steaks from the freezer. The food was odd, but it was free. Donna was tickled by a box of macaroni with a ten-dollar price sticker. There were so many bottles of wine in the basement that they didn't feel bad throwing out one they didn't like. They had never been great wine drinkers. Scott liked beer, but there was none to be found.

Donna rhapsodized about all the unfamiliar doodads in the kitchen—hanging herbs, a garlic wreath, sun-catchers.

“I envy people who have time to meditate or admire the light that comes through a sun-catcher or read a poem,” she said. “What a different kind of life. I wonder if I could live like that. A yoga teacher's life.”

They imagined the yoga instructor to be lithe and tall, the opposite of her nervous little husband. It was odd that there were no photographs around, just chicken-scratch paintings of color swirls. The books in the house mostly had to do with meditation and the Self-Realization Fellowship of Paramahansa Yogananda.

When Scott saw Donna sorting the laundry, he felt a stir of curiosity. Her domestic sphere had never interested him at all, just as the equipment in the barn didn't interest her, but now he saw her in a different light. He noticed the way she stood on tiptoe, tentatively trying a yoga pose, to reach the pots and pans hanging from the kitchen ceiling. The way she squeezed the eyedropper when her contact lenses irritated her eye. The way she spiraled cream on her face. Little things like that. He feared she would never forgive him for hurting her, but now they were living in the lap of luxury. They could be happy again.

They went nowhere, not to the beach, or to any of the local attractions, not even to the supermarket—except once when Donna needed some tampons and she had a two-dollar coupon for some sunscreen. In the evenings they watched movies from a wall of DVDs. They settled into a routine that could suit them both for the rest of their lives, he thought. A swank house for free, satisfying work they enjoyed, unusual grub, the little dog.

“We’re living in a dream,” he said. “Hollywood!”

“Oh, yeah,” Donna said, flipping through some DVDs. “Like it’s belching fairy dust. I think they call that smog.”

“Don’t be negative, Donna! Let’s have a whole summer without any downers.”

“Me? I’m hunky-dory. I’m a fountain of cheer.”

She laughed. She was her old self.

She worried about the little dog. He was not allowed out without his harness and leash. For brief times he could be left outside in a covered wire enclosure, but he looked lonesome in it. She hugged the little dog several times a day, scooping him up in her arms and pressing him so close he squealed.

“I wish we could take little Slingshot home with us. Scott, we could kidnap him!”

Scott stared at his wife in surprise. “Dog food costs money.”

“I didn’t mean it,” Donna said quickly. “But I don’t think they care about him. Why would they go to Italy and leave him with total strangers?”

One morning, just after Scott came in from dipping leaves out of the pool with the long-handled net, a trucking company telephoned, saying its truck could not get up the narrow private road. The delivery would be left near the mailbox on the main road, but Scott would have to come and sign for it. He recalled that the owner had mentioned some freight due later in the month. “You can haul it into the barn with the Bobcat.” He had shown Scott where to stow the freight—in a dark space behind some sliding doors.

“Oh, boy,” Scott said to Donna as he set off on the Bobcat. “Fun!”

A tattooed driver in a Dodgers cap shoved a clipboard at him. He and his surly cohort had unloaded two long cardboard boxes—unexpectedly huge.

“I’ll have to make two trips,” Scott said, signing the paper.

The driver and his buddy vamoosed without helping Scott load. Taking care that the Bobcat’s claw didn’t puncture the cardboard, Scott

drove slowly, keeping the Bobcat treads on the sand-and-stone pathway from the road toward the barn. The box wanted to sway, and he had to maneuver it past the trees and bushes on the shoulders while imagining sidelines applause.

When he returned with the second box, Donna was in front of the barn, gesticulating frantically. He cut the engine.

“Do you realize what’s in this box?” she called.

The cardboard was loose. She lifted a flap, revealing shiny brown wood with metal trim.

“A coffin!” she cried. “There must be two of them.”

“Burial boxes,” he said. “Eternal Dumpsters.”

“His and hers,” she said.

The label had so much fine print it was hard to read, but he made out “D.B. World.” Death beds?

The sliding doors in the barn, he realized now, were made of weathered barn siding. You wouldn’t even know they were doors.

“Well, this beats all I’ve ever seen,” he said.

With the Bobcat, he stacked the boxes in the space behind the sliding doors. The closet seemed to have been fashioned just to conceal a pair of coffins.

“Maybe they’re not in Italy,” said Donna, who was hulling strawberries on the patio. “Maybe they’re going to come and murder us in our beds and put us in these caskets.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Scott. “Wouldn’t garbage bags do?”

“Well, the kind of people who would do something this weird—everything about them is squirrely, isn’t it? Think of something about them that’s not freaky strange.”

He said, “They’re planning ahead. They do things different in California.”

“Would California law let you be buried in your yard?” she asked.

“I wonder.”

“Maybe it was a two-for-one sale.”

A few days passed. Scott had written the owner an e-mail about the delivery of the boxes, but there was no word from him.

“Maybe they’re not in Italy,” Donna said. “They could be down the road, watching us. We don’t know anything about those people. We don’t know what they might be scheming.”

She was swinging a pair of pruning shears.

"I've got it," she said later. "We never saw the woman, the yoga teacher. Maybe he murdered her, and it'll look like we did it. Maybe your little bulldozer buried her over there." She pointed at the dirt patch.

"Oh, that doesn't make any sense," he said.

"Maybe you should ask your cousin about her yoga teacher."

"Terry's camping in Alaska for the summer. You remember."

"Oh, we could never find anybody in Alaska."

That night Donna made a peculiar lasagna with ground-bison sauce, and they opened a bottle of pink wine. She had made a salad of garden vegetables. Scott didn't recognize half of them, but they tasted fine.

"This wine is pretty good," he said. "Do you like it?"

"Yeah, I like it. I like it sweet."

After finishing everything on his plate, he said, "Just look at us. Living the high life."

"It's about time." Donna rose from the table to get the dessert.

They had almost finished the bottle of wine. He poured the rest, dividing it between their glasses.

"I've figured it out," she said, sitting down with a spatula and a pie. "One of them is sick—cancer probably. And they're going on a farewell tour through Europe. When the sick one dies, the other one will commit suicide."

"Yeah, they've got their caskets waiting." Scott swallowed his wine. Oh, he loved the wine. He was getting used to it. "The second person will have to climb into the casket before committing suicide." He laughed. "He'll have to call somebody to come and bury them."

"I think she's the one sick," Donna said. "We didn't even see her. He's taking care of her."

"It could be him that's sick," Scott said. "She's talked him into going to see the Pope about it. Or going to Lourdes. That's where they're going."

"I wonder if they're Catholic."

"Do Catholics believe in yoga?"

Slingshot dropped a toy in front of him.

"What will happen to Slingshot?" she asked.

"He'll find somebody."

"This wonderful place they've made, and they've gone off to Italy, of all places."

"To die!" they screamed simultaneously. The little dog whimpered under the table.

"What if they don't come back?" Donna shrieked. "What if there's red tape and they can't get back to the U.S.? He can't get back with

the body, or maybe he's so upset he just stays there with her and kills himself right there. Maybe he gets her ashes and jumps into the Seine with them."

"That's in France."

"Wherever. Scott—what would we do if it was us? If it was ever us?"

"It will be us. One day."

"Would you jump into the Seine with me? With my ashes?"

"What rivers are in Italy?"

"The Volga?"

"The Zambezi? Which river would you like to jump into? Let's decide that first."

"I don't know that many rivers," she said. "How high would the bridge be? I don't know if I could jump from a really high bridge."

"It might be easier actually."

"If it's really high, I'll chicken out."

He laughed and cupped her face. She was simon-pure pretty. He said, "It'll be a long time before we have to think about coffins or which river to jump in."

"You never know."

"Don't you think we're good together now?"

"OK," she said.

She turned from him and went to let Slingshot into the outdoor cage. She was in the habit of standing there with him. When they got back to Kentucky, Scott ought to get a little dog for her.

Donna returned with Slingshot and gave him a biscuit, spilling half the package on the floor. Clumsily, she escorted him to his bed in the corner of the den. She started to curl up with the dog, but Scott pulled her up and helped her into the bedroom. She mumbled, "He's easy pickin's... the well-known banjo player, ha ha!"

A thunderbolt hit him: If the owner was such a do-it-yourselfer, why didn't he build his own coffins? "Donna?"

She was snoring.

Stockpiling coffins was just the kind of crazy thing you'd expect from a kook in California, Scott thought. The guy didn't look like a do-it-yourselfer—not in that sickly green getup that made him look like a Popsicle.

The next morning, Donna guzzled pomegranate juice and popped ibuprofen. "Was I really drunk? I don't remember."

"Don't you remember putting Slingshot out in his cage?"

“Coyotes could have carried him off and I wouldn’t have known.” She shuddered.

“Don’t you remember how we joked about the caskets and made it into a murder mystery?”

“Don’t joke about murder.”

She poured water into the coffeemaker. She tugged at her hair. Then she scratched her head until dandruff flew.

“I didn’t even drink that much.” She fumbled with a vacuum-sealed package of gourmet coffee.

He wanted to get out. Skipping breakfast, he went to mow in the cool morning air. He noticed the patch of bare dirt, embossed with Bobcat treads. He had loved heaving rocks around with the Bobcat. Now his druid arrangement seemed both innocent and unsettling, but he was never one to read too much into a thing.

Donna was spending hours by the pool with a book. Slingshot was tethered to her chair.

“We should drive to the beach,” he said.

“Where’s that?”

“The whole Pacific Ocean is out there.” He pointed west.

“We have a swimming pool.”

“We should see more of California while we’re here. Tour the stars’ homes.”

“I know what you’re up to,” she said, her voice rising.

“What do you mean?”

Awkwardly, she sat up in the clumsy slingback chair—with the striped canvas cover like you see in very old movies.

“You’ve got a sinister plot in mind,” she yelled. Slingshot jumped. “Don’t you look at me in that tone of voice.”

“Donna, what’s got into you?”

She ignored him, returning to her reading. She lolled by the pool until she had finished her book. She told him it was an inspirational story about a man who rented an old house on the beach, and visitors kept coming, people he didn’t know, but each one had an interesting story to tell. She was cheerful, excited about what to make for supper. She didn’t seem to remember her outburst earlier.

“I don’t understand what’s going on with you,” he kept saying.

“I wonder if you’re just imagining things,” she said. “Come on, help me rummage in the freezer.”

She held up a package. “Ostrich!”

“I don’t know if I can eat an ostrich.”

“Not a whole one, silly. Funny, I haven’t found a single package of chicken in here.”

“OK. Ostrich.” He didn’t care.

The weeks went by calmly then. The area of bare dirt was greening over with weeds. Scott mowed the weeds and trimmed the hedges. He found a lot to do, just keeping the place neat. He imagined staying out here and getting yard work. He loved it. Donna seemed satisfied with the garden, the housekeeping, and the dog. In the evenings after supper, they watched *Wheel of Fortune* and the reality shows or a movie. They saw *Meet the Fockers* twice. They drove to the beach once, but Donna wore inappropriate shoes, and the sand bothered her feet. She didn’t want to go barefooted in case of medical waste or jellyfish. It was crowded. The freeways were nerve-racking. They felt better when they got back to the house and little Slingshot danced in circles of joy.

The owner had left four checks for them, dated on the first of each month. They had not heard from him again, but the third check cleared. Wanting to save as much as possible, they did without milk, and they had run out of eggs.

“Maybe it’s all your fault,” Donna said suddenly as she was loading the dishwasher. “You lured me out here. Maybe those coffins gave you ideas.”

Slamming the dishwasher door, she began screaming and kicking at the kitchen stools. She knocked a stool over and sent it rolling recklessly into the living room. She kicked the kitchen wall, dislodging a silicone doorstop. Slingshot skittered across the tile floor like a tumbleweed.

“I see your plan now. You want to get rid of me.”

“Watch it, Donna—for crying out loud! This is not our stuff. Calm down.”

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. Then he tried to hold her still, but she shouted, “Don’t touch me!”

After a minute her rant subsided, and she was suddenly very tired. She went to bed early, without showering or brushing her teeth. He sat in the den, channel dancing, then realized he hadn’t seen Slingshot in a while. He tiptoed into the bedroom and found the dog curled up beside Donna.

“Come on, little buddy.” Scott maneuvered the dog out of the bed and into the outdoor enclosure. Donna had not cleaned it that morning, and Slingshot didn’t want to go to the far end. He finished quickly. Back in the house, he scurried to Donna and curled up beside her again.

“Sweet baby,” she murmured.

The next day, she apologized for falling asleep so early, and again she did not remember her outburst. Although Scott did not want to believe anything was wrong, he realized there had been more than two of the spells. The others were only fleeting bursts of temper, and he had assumed that she was still angry with him for the cruel way he had treated her. But he wasn't sure now.

"Tell me what's wrong, Donna. What do I have to do to please you?"

"Nothing's wrong."

"I've told you a thousand times how sorry I am," he said. "I don't think this is working out."

"Don't be silly. When I see you on that Bobcat, I remember how you were always the guy for me. It used to be so sweet." She turned away. She wouldn't let him see her cry.

They were in the emergency room. Donna had had another spell, and this time she had hurt herself. It was not clear whether she had broken the wine glass deliberately or had dropped it and fallen on shattered glass. Her leg was bleeding in several places. She wasn't drunk; he knew that. She sobbed and screamed alternately, more than anybody would from some superficial cuts. She didn't even need stitches.

They gave her a sedative and hooked her up to an IV. Soon she became sluggish, mumbling softly.

Scott paced the corridor, which was lined with paintings of mountains. It puzzled him that a hospital would have an art gallery. It seemed incongruous, like the coffins in the barn. He stared at a frightening purple volcano spewing pink fire.

By the time the nurse had dressed her wounds, Donna was back to normal, but bewildered.

"It's OK, Donna," Scott said. "You had another spell, and you fell on your glass."

"I'm not hurt, am I?"

"You'll be all right."

"Where's Slingshot?"

"He's safe at home."

The medical people were in and out. Donna answered a barrage of questions. Did she see double? Any recent falls? Hit on the head? Had she had headaches? Any lapses of memory?

The doctor who came in two hours later suggested that she consult a neurologist, who might order a fancier brain scan and some other tests.

"What would that cost?" she asked.

"I couldn't say."

“Could it wait till we get back to Kentucky next month?” she asked. “It’ll be cheaper there.”

“I’ll give you some medicine that will keep you calm until then,” the doctor said. He seemed pleasant enough, though busy manipulating his handheld gadgets.

Scott heard him out in the hall dictating to his phone about a Caucasian female with no history of headaches and no discernible neurological deficits presenting with episodes of temporary rage and amnesia. Scott thought he heard the word “tumor.”

When they returned to the house, Slingshot cut figure eights through the vast tiled room like a crazed skater.

“Precious baby!” Donna cried. “You sweet thing!”

They left for Kentucky as soon as the final check cleared. There was no use taking chances, Scott said, and Donna didn’t object. He had e-mailed the owner, who replied immediately with some directions for closing up the house. No problem, the guy wrote. They had instructions on what to do with the little dog if they had to leave early. The kennel was in the Valley. A vet tech named Samantha always took care of Slingshot while his owners traveled.

Scott needed the open road now, to think. It would be a humdrum journey home—all the way across the Southwest on I-40, then up I-75. He would have to do all the driving because Donna’s pills made her spacey. If something was really wrong with her, he was afraid he couldn’t face it.

“We’ll never have a house like that,” Donna said.

“You never know.”

“Good-bye, California,” she said in a small voice, almost too quiet for him to hear.

They set off across the mountains toward I-40 East. If they made good time, they could stop in Flagstaff and from there decide whether to detour to the Grand Canyon. Break up the monotony, he thought.

She was calm. She didn’t cringe at traffic.

At Barstow she aimed an air kiss at his cheek. “You old meanie,” she said. “I forgive you all your trespasses. I’m a lucky girl.”

“Yeah,” he said.

All day he pondered the meaning of the summer. A new world had opened to him, and he desperately wanted the pleasures of plenty and leisure to continue somehow. Since he loved mowing and machinery, he could seek outdoor work, maybe at the country club. Tending a golf course, an unoffending green with satisfying dips and curves, would suit

him. Hauling the boxed caskets with the Bobcat was the most satisfying task of the whole summer, he thought. He remembered Donna in her crooked sunhat, a basket of greenery over her arm, waving when he returned with the second long box. A thrill had gone through him, thinking some glorious life-changing news awaited him. He loved her again.

But when they were at the ER, he had wished he could just slip out onto the boulevard and hitchhike a ride into another life.

“When you get a job, we’ll remodel,” Donna said as they crossed the state line into Arizona. “Let’s don’t do aluminum siding. That’ll be tacky. We’ll buy some sun-catchers. And I want wine every day.”

He hadn’t been honest with himself. But the truth came blaring through his consciousness now in the Arizona desert. When they drove out to California, he had been fantasizing some way to stay there in movie-land without Donna. It was too hard to face her. Being out of work for so long had made him mean and hateful. But the extravagant pink-flamingo house mellowed him, and then things took a turn. If she did have a brain tumor, he would have to be available. It was important to be available, he thought. He wished he could box up his fear in a deserted barn somewhere. He should never have bonked her on the head that time with the mirror—and he knew it the moment he threw the thing at her. If she had a brain tumor, it was his fault. Now, forced to trust him to take care of her, she had forgiven him. And he was obliged to her from now on out. Sometimes he thought his life was going nowhere, but then something would happen to direct it along an inevitable path. Either way, it was a mystery.

At the end of the day, in Flagstaff, they watched the sunset from the parking lot of a motel off the interstate. The open land beyond the highway lights was glaring and empty.

“You couldn’t catch the sun out here,” he said.

“Huh? Oh, you mean those sun-catchers.” She shivered. “The West is too big for me. It makes me feel lost.”

Murmuring a sort of baby talk, she bent over to pet the dog.

“Don’t worry, Slingshot,” she said. “I won’t let the coyotes get you. We’ll be home soon.”