

My Last Tenants

by H. W. Moss

"Those're my last tenants standing against the wall, looking as if they were alive," my aunt remarked as she held the album open for me to view its contents. There were several color photographs on the page, so she pointed that specific one out for me. "There, standing beside the Crown of Thorns as if painted. I call that plant a wonder, now."

Two women, not young but not old either, approaching middle-age, one with longish, the other close-cropped hair, the one dark and likely dyed the other natural and going to grey, were captured for all time in the picture, half smiles on their faces although they could just as well have been smirks. They stared at us from the stiff black cardboard page to which Kay had turned. They wore faded blue jeans and Pendleton shirts and on their hands gardening gloves. They stood against the backyard garden's rear wall and must have just turned to face the camera because they looked as if they were not quite posed. The view of the brickwork behind their backs was so wide the shot had to have been taken from a considerable distance, at least as far away as the lip of the rear cement patio just outside the sliding glass kitchen doors.

It was early afternoon and we were being oh, so civilized, having tea, my aunt and me.

"I really liked them at first," Kay said with her elongated Midwestern twang. "That's Ellie," a parchment finger rough with age picked out and hovered over the woman on the left, "and that's EllieSue." The finger worked its way up, then down the height of each woman's body in an odd little caress.

Aunt Kay continued in the peremptory tone I knew too well. My father, her brother, could direct his voice the same way when he desired. It usually meant he was about to say something he thought should stick. This was a sibling similarity of speech which always threw me and I had an

immediate unconscious reaction. It made me want to rebel and take my own opposite course of action no matter what sage words followed.

"I warned them to be careful with that garden. I wanted everything left just as it was, just as I planted it, and they said, 'Of course Miss Katherine' like my students used to say when they wanted to please me. That rings hollow after a while, you know."

Kay's hand drifted down the page and settled on a different color image of the garden. She rested two fingers on the picture in a manner I can only describe as fondly tender. Whereas I saw nothing other than the photo of a rather large begonia, Aunt Kay obviously saw something much more. Her heart was too soon made glad by memories.

I do not qualify as Katharine's favorite niece. That honorarium is reserved for another of my cousins which I have always attributed to the fact that she is Katherine's namesake. My cousin Kay is a mother now, with a Master's Degree but no thought of using it, merely raising children. She once confided in me, probably because she thought that since we are the same sex I would understand and agree or at least sympathize with her, that she aspired to nothing greater than having babies. So it struck me as somewhat peculiar when she and her husband with their perpetually growing family was not the beneficiary of our aunt's home instead of me and Vince.

Maybe they never asked.

Kay's last tenants were gone now and I was living in the old house, the place we had visited time and again when I was growing up and she and Dad were still on speaking terms. I had an odd feeling playing hostess to her. It wasn't the fact that I was paying rent, although that still seemed strange. However, it was at moments like these when I accepted her as a guest in the living room that once had been hers and where I had played on the carpet so many times as a child, it was as if she were still living there and I was the visitor again.

Vince and I had turned to her out of desperation. We had been evicted from our house in the city, had learned the hard way that one income is not enough to support a mortgage and two people. We rented for a while but had to give up the apartment to relatives of the landlord. Rent control allows that. Doesn't seem right.

Anyway, when Vince learned over Thanksgiving from another of my cousins that Aunt Kay's house was suddenly available, he wanted it in the worst way. He said we should jump on it and insisted I ask her for it. It was the pecking order I resented. He knew her well enough; he could have just as well spoken to her directly.

I made the call and did not really expect her to say yes. Perhaps she felt kindly disposed toward me since I had taken the time to visit her once in the retirement community where everything was taken care of for her. The cafeteria served three meals a day, a staff physician checked on her regularly, there were plenty of Filipino girls who changed the sheets once a week and a chauffeur if you really wanted to go into town.

I swear, I'll shrivel up and turn into a prune if that's where I end up.

Amazingly, Kay agreed to rent her old home to us and granted us everything we asked. We had no furniture to speak of, so Vince nudged me to see if Kate would be so kind as to let us use some of hers. She had a lot of things in a rented storage locker and she took us over to the warehouse where we looked them over. She gave us her dining room table and chairs and wanted to know if we could use an end table or two. Merely mentioning how beautiful the Oriental rugs and Persian carpets were, collected over a long life of travel in foreign countries, caused her to nearly force them on us. An armoire I remember being small enough to crawl inside and hide as a youngster became our bedroom closet.

Her comments had been tactless throughout my childhood. I was perhaps nine when she watched me salt a chicken drum stick. “No wonder you’re so fat.” Although I have long believed she was more like Oscar Wilde and never unintentionally rude, to this day I feel hurt by that remark.

But Aunt Kay had changed considerably in the last few years, I thought as I placed the pack of Marlboros next to my purse and began to strike the lighter. Of course she disapproved, but I saw only the slightest squint of annoyance in her eyes. She kept her opprobrium to herself, which was quite unlike the woman I had come to know, more as a person than a relative, when I was in college.

The worst thing about that part of my life had been that Kay was on the faculty. She taught science. Before they even connected our same last name, my roommates warned me about her. I was told about her a 1920's style, that she was a stickler for punctuality and gave more than her share of surprise exams throughout the semester. I was warned to carefully avoid taking any courses taught by her.

In the last few years I had become cautiously optimistic that perhaps we could be friends as adults, Kay and I. We certainly had not got along well during my first two decades of life.

There were plenty of other amenities which came with the house. Living was made easier by a real garage with an electric door opener, a garbage disposal, bookshelves firmly screwed in place, not made of bricks and boards balanced on the floor, and one and a half bathrooms. Vince got the half.

These were the niceties I left when I married Vince in the middle of my third year of school and, after graduation, moved to the city where even parking spaces are scarce.

I particularly liked having a garage door opener! It was amazing how quickly one gets used to it again.

Aunt Kay continued to go out of her way to be overly solicitous. She said nothing when we moved furniture around, from one end of the living room to the other. I heard no helpful criticism when we hung a hook on the back of the bathroom door and, during one of her inspections, she stopped and stared at it. Not a word about the color we painted the master bedroom, either.

We had been in the house for about a month, but our possessions were still in chaos. Vince had found a clerical job in town and my commute had been decreased by half an hour so I was home more than I used to be. It didn't take long for the three bedroom house to become a luxury I did not want to do without.

I looked forward to Christmas in that house. There was a holly bush growing outside near the east side of the brick wall. I had already clipped some wisteria leaves and placed them with an iris in a carafe in the center of the dinner table.

Plus the dog was in heaven in the back yard. He had rooted out two gophers and a philodendron and the odd bone now and then. I planned to dig up an oleander before he started chewing on the leaves. They're poison.

Kay called me one Saturday morning and said she wanted to talk about a lease. I could hardly refuse. Vince took the opportunity to go to a ball game. He was not on Kay's bad side, yet he made it a point not to be around when she was. Of course, I was not going to sign anything without him and she was my aunt, not his, so I agreed to have her over. "Tea time," I said. "We shall have tea." I set out finger cakes, cream and sugar on my best service. I was lucky to find two matching cups and saucers.

I held the screen door open, her arms too full to work it herself. She walked to the center of the living room and just stood there surveying the changes. Finally I removed a grocery bag – paper which you never see any more -- from her clutches.

Her white head nodded thank you and she followed me into the kitchen. She took a seat at the breakfast table. That was another article of furniture she had been gracious enough to pull out of storage. Her new apartment at the Los Gatos Retirement Community absorbed perhaps ten percent of what she owned. I am sure she looked wistfully over every item in my kitchen which she had lent us.

For no apparent reason, she said "Yuh-esss." There it was again, that peculiar Midwestern way of stretching a vowel into a diphthong that was so characteristic of her brothers and herself, which could mean approval or disapproval, acceptance or rejection depending on what followed. For one frantic moment I wondered if she was going to say something about the crocheted doilies that no longer covered every arm-rest of every chair in the living room we had just walked through.

I offered her a teacup. She declined sugar but dripped milk into it saying, "The English drink it this way." We lifted cups to lips and nibbled cookies in uncomfortable silence.

She directed me to remove the contents of the paper sack. A manila envelope lay on top of a photo album. I slipped a sheaf of papers from the envelope into my hand as Kay reached across and opened the dust cover of the album. I was holding a formal looking lease about seven legal sized pages in length. Resigned to the chore, I began to read while Kay flipped page after page of the album. A glance in her direction revealed that most of the pictures it was crammed with were of the garden.

I began to read the lease with the soft susurrations of turning pages and her muttered comments as backdrop. "There's the old chrysanthemum. She was so beautiful in bloom."

A pause caught my attention. Then: "That'll be Robert," she said with a voice full of gentle innocence.

There was no person in the photo so perhaps, I thought, she means a genus or family. The genus Robertus or some such. I stopped reading completely with her next words.

"Next to him is Frances. She was a dear friend, too."

Her finger had come to rest on the leafy image of a large poinsettia, its long arms arching over the steps that lead to the rear door of the garage. I had just that morning clipped it back from the path we took to get to the garbage cans.

"Francis?" I asked as politely as I could.

"Yuh-essss." That stretched vowel followed by a sibilant again. "I knew she would like to be near the others. I planted her beside the lover who hurt her so. His name was Richard. See," she indicated with her finger a small shrub, I was pretty sure it was a stunted Eugenia. "He didn't do so well, as you can tell."

That was when she pointed out Ellie and EllieSue.

"Those're my last tenants."

I studied the faces. They were unremarkable enough. I said, "Aunt Kay, where did they go?"

"What do you mean, dear? They left."

"I mean, they moved into another house somewhere, right?"

"Why, I really don't know."

She would not be pinned down. Finally, I asked: "Are they planted out there in your garden too?"

"Why, of course," she said squeezing the words of their every syllable. A slightly astonished look crossed her time worn face. "Right over there." Beneath that gently rubbing finger, a couple of ficus plants. "Many people are out there," she said with beguiling simplicity.

I remembered what the dog digging in the earth yesterday afternoon uncovered and I shuddered.

Then Kay shook her head and pursed her lips in an expression that was also all too familiar to me. I had grown up with that facial twinge as well. Amazing the attributes siblings share.

"You know, they used only one bed between them?"

"Those two girls?" I asked. "Your tenants?"

"Yee-esss. But there are three bedrooms in the house," she added thoughtfully. "Now, how was I supposed to know when I let the place to them? They were my first renters, you see. They seemed so nice. Here I thought women roommates would be best for the place. I guess I just don't know how to pick 'em after all."

Her gaze took in the room in which we sat and, I was sure, her mind's eye invaded the unseen rooms beyond. She was scrutinizing all environs -- the back bedrooms, front and back yards, the garage -- with that penetrating stare. I said nothing.

"Do you think that's any way for young ladies to behave?" she finally asked.

I attempted tact. "You mean you didn't approve of their lifestyle?"

"It wasn't so much that, although I pondered it to considerable length after I realized what was going on. I think I'm pretty open minded. No, what I mean is what they did to the garden." She lifted her teacup and sipped, the picture of womanly decorum.

Her hand touched a page and turned it. I wondered about this modern world in which we found ourselves. How did someone who was essentially born in the beginning of the last century put the pieces of contemporary life together?

"The first thing they did was move Raymond there." Raymond was a miniature peach. "When I mentioned it they said he was in the way. Raymond and I go back a long way. He was one of my earliest successes. Grew him from a pip. I told them he would not do well anywhere but near the patio. Still, they wanted more room for vegetables. I never grow vegetables out back, you know. It isn't worth it in the long run. They called it 'French Intensive' gardening with a drip system and I'll admit it did not take as much room as some gardens I've seen. Still, it wasn't long before they had about half my old friends in new places. Some of them were gone completely."

Although I thought I knew the answer, I had to ask. "What happened when they moved Raymond?"

"He died," she said with a simplicity and finality I had not anticipated. "So did Mister Mikkio and I don't know how many others."

"I know this must have hurt you, Aunt Kay."

"Yee-esss."

"So you evicted them, right?"

"Oh, no. Tenants have so many rights these days, you see. They have to move of their own volition or else they sue you. I thought about it, of course, but I found it would have been quite impossible to evict them. Not for the reasons I told my attorney anyway. It's hard to evict tenants once they move in on you."

I wanted her to volunteer why they had willingly moved, but she seemed content to let the matter hang. I decided to be more direct. "Katherine, how did you get EllieSue and Ellie to leave?"

She was the picture of shocked innocence. "Me?" she said drawing this vowel out too, her mouth remaining open in surprise. "But I had nothing to do with them leaving. It was their own choice. Maybe my friends helped. After all, they were the ones who were most inconvenienced. I certainly did nothing."

"Your backyard plants. That is why they left?"

"Well, yee-ess. Over a two week period they got quite ill you see. First they complained of upset stomachs and told me the water must be bad here. I know better than that. I lived here twenty-five years and the water is as sweet as the day I moved in. If you ask me, I think they ate some of their own new vegetables. I know they had potatoes and tomatoes and eggplant just coming up. They probably couldn't resist putting a few leaves and sprouts into a salad. They were vegetarians and probably thought they could eat anything that grows. Everyone knows those plants are part of the Nightshade family."

She stared intently for a moment at another garden specimen in the album. "Rose hips in your tea are one thing, but rhubarb leaves and skunk cabbage are quite another. Can you imagine how they might mistake a daffodil or hyacinth bulb for some type of onion? I can. Next they complained their throats were irritated, burning. I came over one afternoon and saw their lips were cracked and swollen. Knew right away it was Oxalic acid had done that. Found in rhubarb leaves. You can't even put them in compost."

A thought occurred to me. "Aunt Kay, you taught horticulture at State College, didn't you?"

"Botany was my field, dear. You never did recognize the distinction between the two."

"But if your tenants were getting sick from their garden, why didn't they just stop eating from it?"

She looked mildly amused. "But I'm certain they did stop. Thing is, you don't have to ingest irritants in your food. You can get them in your body in all kinds of ways. So, they continued to exhibit symptoms, different ones all the time. Yee-esss."

She held her tea cup delicately by its handle, one hand supporting the saucer and asked for a refill. I poured silently.

"I do recall them burning -- using the incinerator out back," she said between sips. "If they were foolish enough to throw poison oak on the fire, that would account for the persistent cough they developed. It grows everywhere here. I had to use thick gloves to handle it every year. I was careful never to set it afire of course. I wonder if they knew any better?"

My own cup had grown cold but I was afraid to break the spell. I wanted to hear more.

"There is a wild apricot tree back there, too. Ordinarily, one does not eat the pit. It's full of cyanide. But with those girls, you just can't tell what they might have put in their blender. They complained of skin irritation and blurred vision those last few days. When they called to say they had to move if they were ever to feel well again, EllieSue mentioned the latest problem. Her friend, she said, was quite unable to speak. I knew what caused those symptoms, too. Charles and Grace are my two dieffenbachias, my lovely dumb canes, out near the alley gate. Everyone says the leaves are only toxic to cats, but I know better. They are doing quite well now. Teaching friends of mine for many years, you know."

Kay's cup rattled slightly in its saucer as she placed it on the breakfast nook table. She chose that moment to rise. "The girls gave me a month's notice but moved out the next day. They didn't even ask for their security deposit back."

She extended her right hand. We were never big on hugging. I stood and held out my own, but could only muster a light tug on her fingertips. I said goodbye.

"I do hope you like the house," Aunt Kay said. "Read the lease over. It's for a year with nothing unusual. We can discuss it after your husband has seen it."

"They moved, didn't they? I mean, your last tenants, they are still alive, aren't they?"

"Of course they are my dear. They shortened their stay here is all and I let them out of their lease. When you called and asked if you could rent the old place it was terribly fortuitous for you and Vincent, don't you think? Anyway, my dear, you won't mind if I leave my delphiniums in their pot out there on the patio, will you? I know it can be in the way, but those plants need the early morning light. I love those colorful spurred flowers atop the tall green stalks. And I'm sure you will too."

She made her way to the door, the photo album in its sack under her arm. I stood at the screen several moments after she was gone.

Waiting for Vinnie to return from the game, I have not looked at the lease. I may not sign it at all.

I wonder if he will understand. I wonder if I will be able to explain to him why we have to look for another place to live. The only thing that is certain is we cannot stay here.

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