

**in
the
house**

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In the House

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“You cannot see my face, for no-one may see me and live.”

Exodus 33:20

He stopped, looking at the little scrap of paper in the palm of his hand, then at the number of the house affixed to the rather cracked brick column which, with its counterpart, served to support the gate which was, as he discovered, locked. After he had reassured himself that the house number corresponded to the number on the piece of paper in his hand, he reached into his pocket and took out two keys bound together with a piece of old string.

He had obtained both keys and address at the Office together with a statement that, by 6 p.m., he should unconditionally return the keys. He could calmly inspect the premises and only then, after carefully considered judgement, decide whether he wanted or did not want to live here.

He tried the lock in the gate with one key. He turned the key twice and then pushed at the rusty handle, at which the gate slowly opened with a creak. He entered the yard on a narrow concrete pathway.

Already earlier, as he had stood in front of the locked gate, he could see at least part of the spacious family villa, but he did not look at it, averting his gaze. He wanted to enjoy the first sight only now when the gate was open and he was on the territory in front of the house. He tried to close the gate behind him, but the handle on the other side of the gate was missing, apparently the owner opened the gate only with the key, he thought, gazing at the strange looking lock.

He closed the gate simply with a slight push. He turned around, looking at the highest point of the villa, the tapering skylight. His head reeled as the skylight floated in the clouds of the autumn day. He quickly lowered his eyes and looked straight ahead.

He saw the symmetrically designed entrance to the house, the few steps leading up to a raised terrace. One could, he thought, hardly guess that the front door of the house was there. He went on, climbed the four steps and found himself on the terrace.

The surface was very dusty, he was leaving light footprints behind him. He went to the dirty door, probably the main entrance to the house. He wanted to open the door with the second key, but first he briefly pulled at the handle. The door surprisingly opened.

He entered the House, into a dark hallway, and suddenly his head was reeling strangely, first only slightly, as if merely a mild intoxication, sweet and aroma-filled. He had to sit down on a wooden step and wait until his head and body felt more normal. Fortunately, in a few moments, he felt completely fine, so he could stand up and look around.

He saw a wooden staircase, which apparently led to the first floor of the House. He saw a door on the left and a door opposite and, when he had taken a few steps, he saw the stone steps leading down to the cellar of the House.

He came to a halt, caught his breath and listened intently for a while. He heard, and this surprised him, a faint, rustling, fine metallic sound. However, soon he stopped paying attention to the sound, reassuring himself that this was certainly just the friction of a branch on the wall or eaves of the House. He walked to the door on the left, intending to pull on the handle. But instead of a handle, there was a big round metal button.

He concluded that the keys to the House could be hanging somewhere near the door, as they often are. He felt gently all over the door and gradually examined every inch of the frame with his fingertips.

Suddenly, he heard several distinct footsteps and then it was clear to him. No branch, no drainpipe, the noises must come from a caretaker, there was clearly someone living in the House. He wanted to descend the stone steps to the basement, where he guessed would be the caretaker's flat, but at the last moment decided to go through the House calmly, unaccompanied by a caretaker. He would inspect the rooms on the first floor without the comments of another person who was a resident here and would, as is usual, praise even that which did not deserve praise.

He ascended the wooden stairs leading up to the first floor. The stairs creaked under the weight of his body. Startled, he stopped, it would not be at all pleasant for him if the caretaker caught him here. Although, he thought in relief, it would suffice to show the address

and phone number of the Office on the piece of paper, one phone call by the caretaker would certainly explain his intrusion in the House.

With the feeling that he was doing something forbidden, which however could immediately be explained in the event of the caretaker catching him, he climbed carefully higher and higher up the wooden stairs.

He reached the landing on the first floor, even managing to notice the beautiful etchings of the city hanging on the walls in the gloom of the staircase, and discovered that there were two doors, one on the right, the other opposite him.

He looked up, the stairs continued upwards, probably to the attic or the second floor. He decided not to go up now, he would check the rooms here, if only he could manage to open the doors.

He carefully leaned over the wooden banister and listened in case the caretaker was monitoring his behaviour. The noises continued, therefore he concluded he could move forward towards the first door.

To be certain, he knocked on the door. He tilted his head towards the door and listened intently to hear if there was anyone behind the door. Perhaps the caretaker's wife, he thought, could be cleaning in there, and then it would be better if she opened the door while he was still standing here on the doorstep. It was just as well that he had not entered, but remained standing at the door, according to good manners, because, after

a while, the door opened and in it stood a beautiful lady, about sixty years old, with a lovely rich head of hair, speckled by age. He could see her in the calm atmosphere, the woman standing opposite him with one hand resting on the doorpost, smiling sweetly at him.

He saw the beautiful dark clothes the woman was wearing and noticed her surprisingly slim figure with the firm breasts, hard to believe belonging to a sixty-year old woman. Perhaps, he thought, the woman is not so old, although, as he stared into her face, he noticed it was full of wrinkles around the eyes and the small open mouth. The woman obviously was waiting until he addressed her to tell her why he had disturbed her. He greeted her and immediately asked whether she was the caretaker's wife, the sounds of whom he had heard from the moment he had entered this House.

"No," the woman said quietly, without looking at him, "I am not a caretaker's wife. I live here. I'm a widow," looking in obvious discomfiture at a point somewhere behind his back.

"Wait a moment," he smiled patiently, groping in his pocket. He took out the little piece of paper and read the address to her.

"Yes," the woman said, "that's definitely correct."

Then it's all an obvious mistake, he thought.

"Are there also people living in the other flats?" he asked, surprised.

The woman nodded. "Yes, there are tenants in all the apartments here."

"In that case," he said with a slight bow, "I apologise. The relevant authorities surely have made a mistake. It's an obvious mistake, there's no longer the slightest doubt about it," he smiled in bewilderment. "They gave me," and he jingled the keys he had pulled from his pocket, "they even gave me the wrong keys. Yes," he nodded, "the mistake is probably at the Office itself."

"Where?" she asked without interest.

"At the Office itself," he said.

"Oh, it's you!" the woman looked at him in surprise.

"You know something about me, madam?"

"Yes, a little," she smiled.

"There has to be an explanation," he said. "Do you have a phone?"

The woman nodded. "I do. I rarely call, but I do. Actually, I never call anyone."

"And may I use your telephone?"

"Sure, come in."

It was a lovely apartment, he managed to glance into one of the rooms. Beautiful, fragrant, antique furniture, Persian carpets on the floors, old paintings on the walls. The woman, however, closed the door to the room opposite. But also the entrance hall in which he was standing was beautiful. Tasteful old wallpaper with hunting scenes, gorgeous old cabinets, a small antique telephone table. The woman was standing at the door,

leaning against it and looking thoughtfully somewhere at the opposite wall. She waited until he had made the call so that she could dismiss him from the apartment.

He picked up the receiver and dialled the phone number that was on the piece of paper. After a while he heard a male voice:

“Hello. What do you want?”

“Good afternoon,” he said patiently into the receiver, turning his back so that the woman could hear as little as possible, “is that the housing office? I'd like to talk to... Hello?” He shouted into the receiver several times. It seemed to him as if there was unusual silence on the other end.

“Yes, I can hear you,” said the voice on the other end, “what do you want?”

“Is that the housing office?”

“No, this is a private apartment.”

He read the phone number into the receiver.

“This is the correct number. What do you want?”

“I want the housing office.”

“You have the wrong number, this is a private flat. Tell me what you want, otherwise I'll have to hang up. You understand, I'm leaving on a long trip and have to finish packing. Tell me what you want and don't waste any more of my time!”

“I want the housing office!”

“I told you,” said the voice on the other end, “you have called a private apartment. I'm going to hang up!”

I'm leaving on a long journey and need to finish packing! 'Bye,'" and he heard the man on the other end hanging up.

He turned, so that at least with a look he could explain his embarrassing behaviour to the woman, but she was no longer standing at the door. He wanted to reach the door and open it to call the woman back into the hall, but the phone cord was too short. So he replaced the receiver and remained standing politely at the door of the apartment.

After a while, he realised that there was a strange silence behind the door to the room. He walked over to the door and pressed his ear to it. There was silence, he could hear only his own rapid breathing.

He knocked on the door, then once again. He reached for the knob and opened it.

The room was empty. He saw the beautiful Persian carpet on the floor, paintings on the walls and the lovely old furniture.

On the table in the middle of the room a note was lying.

Curiously, he read: *"I know you're going to fix the roof! All of us here have had enough of it. We are just waiting for it to fall on us! I wish you good luck and great success in your work!"* Illegible signature.

There was one more glass door. He went up to it and pulled the handle. Closed. The woman probably did not want to talk to him any more, the reason for the slip of

paper on the table. What she had wanted to say, she had said, he would now have to leave. He walked silently through the hall and quietly shut the door behind him. He listened for a moment, but the woman did not appear at the door again.

He cautiously approached the second door and knocked softly. He thought at first that he had been wrong in thinking the sound he was hearing was coming from the cellar. He leaned over the banister, but the rustle from the cellar was different. He leaned closer to the door and listened. He could hear only his own breathing. He knocked again and the door opened slightly.

He saw the eye of a man with big, bushy eyebrows.

“Good afternoon,” he said.

“Stop that noise!”

“Then open the door!”

“I’ll talk to you this way,” said the voice behind the door, “and if you don’t like it, just go away!”

“Please...” he paused. Suddenly he did not know what he had wanted to ask and wondered how to overcome this embarrassing moment. The man behind the door said in a conciliatory tone: “You’ve come regarding our roof?”

“I haven’t,” he said in surprise, “I want to rent this House and I want to live here, that’s all.”

“There are many people living here,” the man behind the door said, “all the apartments are occupied here.”

“All?” he was amazed.

“Yes, all... there are even several families in some.”

“Just a moment!” He interrupted the man, “There is only one lady living right next door to you, she has a large apartment, I think. And she lives there alone. Is that correct?”

“So it seems to you,” the man said with amusement, “have you seen the whole apartment?”

He had to admit he had not. “But I saw her room,” he added, “with a beautiful Persian carpet, beautiful pictures and beautiful antique furniture.”

“But her apartment,” the man at the door interrupted him, “you did not see her whole apartment. Is that right?”

“No. I tell you that I didn’t see it.”

“My apartment,” the man said, “you haven’t seen my apartment. So you know nothing.” The man nodded his head several times thoughtfully. “Are you going to fix the roof?”

“Why are you always going on about the roof?” he shouted angrily, his patience at an end. He did not want to continue talking to the man through the closed door.

“I want to see your face,” he shouted, “it’s not pleasant for me talking to you like this. Do you hear me?”

The door opened. In the doorway, dressed in a

striking, gold-embroidered robe and slippers, stood an old man, with an old face and long white hair that reached down to his shoulders.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted him in surprise, holding out his hand. He wanted to shake hands with the man as a sign of friendship and peace.

“I don’t want to shake hands if I don’t know who you are. Are you a worker? Fitter? Are you going to fix the roof?”

“No,” he said.

“Then it’s best not to shake your hand, you probably have no business here.”

“I want to rent this House. That’s all.”

The man studied him for a moment. “This House is not for rent. But of course,” he said, “now I understand everything! So nice to welcome you here!”

“No, no way!” He quickly corrected the man, “I do not belong here!”

The man nodded his head thoughtfully. “Oh yes, you do, if you are here, you do! Unless...” said the man.

“Unless what...” He repeated after him.

“Unless,” the man finished, “you came to fix the roof.”

“Why are you going on about that roof? I’ve not heard anything else, apart from the roof,” he said almost desperately. “I’m not a roof repairman, not even a worker!”

“What are you, then?”

“I’m a painter.”

“House painter?”

“No, I paint pictures. Still life, portraits, group and individual faces. You don’t believe me?”

“Sir,” the man said, “I don’t care what you say. Here one can invent whatever one likes. Everyone here fabricates a little. You can tell the others any stories, and even believe them yourself...”

He looked at him thoughtfully. “I still don’t understand. You’re not a worker and you’re not here to fix the roof...”

“I came to rent or buy this House. I want to live and work in it. However, I see,” he said patiently, “that the House is occupied and all this is therefore an obvious mistake. By the way, do you have a phone?”

The man nodded.

“I’d like to make a call.”

The man pointed to the telephone. Finally, he looked around the hall. It was small, only a few square metres, with an old mat on the ground and no pictures on the walls. He dialled the number of the relevant office.

“Hello?”

“Good afternoon, is that the housing office?”

“Oh, it’s you again!” the voice on the other end said, “give me a break, be so kind! I’m leaving on a long journey, I’ve no time to joke with you. And if you call again...”

He hung up.

“Thank you,” he said, “I’m sorry to have bothered you. Now, finally, I’ll go to the caretaker, perhaps everything will be explained.”

“To whom?” the man said in amusement.

“The caretaker. Just tell me there is no caretaker! I heard him quite clearly several times, the noises...”

He looked at the man.

“It must be the caretaker! Yes or no...?”

“Yes, let’s say it’s the Caretaker, he can also be called that. Please...” the man put his hand behind his back and with the other hand pointed towards the door. He left the apartment, the man was ready to say good-bye and close the door behind him.

“Once again, thank you and I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

“No harm done,” the man said quite readily, “you didn’t disturb me. I was sitting and thinking. Good-bye.”

“Goodbye,” he said.

The door closed. Why had the man spoken about the roof, as well as the woman before him? He would go up there right now and take a look. If the roof was really damaged, it would not be worth renting the House, as it would be another big expense. Although it must surely all be a mistake, an unpleasant oversight. Nobody at the Office had said anything about tenants, he thought, as he climbed the stairs.