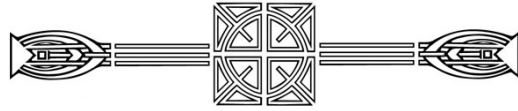


# Tales of An English Garden

By Josephine Hymes



Slim's Painting<sup>1</sup>

## Tale 4: Of Addiction, Love, and Family



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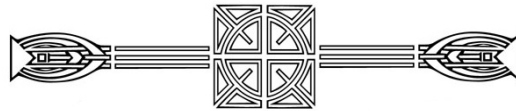
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Sometimes life defies all logic. Terrence had thought that he knew himself well enough, but the changes he had recently experienced proved that there was an entire part of his own heart that he did not understand. For one thing, he had always believed that the restless life of a theatrical actor suited his nature like a well-fitted glove. He had never complained about his having to spend weeks -even months- sleeping in a different hotel every other day, eating little when food was not to his liking, which was rather often, and working late hours to the point of exhaustion. That had been his life since the age of seventeen, and it had always seemed to him as a little price to pay for the glory of his performing art. But in his Fall 1925 tour he began to understand that even life-time wanderers can grow roots.

What is more, as a man of almost thirty years of age, he was proud of his having achieved certain level of control over his passions, at least the appearance of it to the eyes of the world. He had often despised the total lack of self-restraint exhibited by other artists, which was usually exacerbated by the pressures of their work and the liberal views that pervaded in their circle. In fact, ever since his return from the dark pit of addiction and depression, he had striven for temperance to a point that was unnerving for most of his colleagues. Nonetheless, within the safety of marriage, he had discovered that the gentlest but also the most passionate aspects of his own self had only been dormant all those years.

He reckoned it was nothing to be surprised, considering that his wife had always had such an effect on him. Still, it did not cease to amaze him how his life had changed since he had carried her over his threshold. It was not that he had been altered in essence; for he was, after all, the same reserved man that would shun the flattery of the world. And yet, he was not the loner he once had been, not anymore.

Marriage to the woman he loved had brought him a comfortable sense of companionship of mind and soul that pervaded every aspect of life. He only had to step into his home to be wrapped into the warmth of her sunny self, and every dull or bitter moment he could have had in a day would melt. For a man whose career was built on pretending, it was simply liberating that he could, for once, be himself in someone else's presence without fearing

rejection or censure. Even when they argued, there was a sensation of freedom to be mad at each other, knowing that making up was unavoidable. So, it was just natural that such feelings of togetherness would lead a young man and a young woman to constantly let their bodies revel in their mutual affection.

He just couldn't help it and did not make excuses for it. Whenever he was with Candy, he sought every opportunity to lay his hands on her. Sometimes, it would suffice with the softest, fleeting touch of her skin while she was busy in the kitchen or in the garden. That would be enough for him to go about for the day, as long as he could have her all to himself in the evening. Then, in the intimacy of their chamber, he would relentlessly push his case to possess every inch of her, not that she needed much convincing to give herself to him. For although she had been an innocent the first time that they had loved each other intimately, her tender feelings for him had turned his modest wife into an enthusiastic lover.

Now, going from being a man whose needs were regularly satisfied by a loving partner, to one who had to keep abstinence of spiritual and carnal communion for several weeks was not an easy feat. The feeling of loss, even if temporal, was so acute that he had found it impossible to write to her, fearing that she would unnecessarily worry for him, if his words put on paper betrayed his state of discomfort. He was thankful, however, for her daily phone calls. It was appealing to hear her voice every evening; yet he was never comfortable enough to talk to her about his struggles. If he couldn't put them in writing, talking about them on the phone was unthinkable, knowing that at any time the operators could be hearing their conversations. So, he let her talk but longed for the freedom to whisper directly to her ear what his soul wanted to share with her.

To make matters worse, his recent debut into parenthood was not making things easier. As incomprehensible as it could be, the minute Richard, whom he had held for barely a few moments before he had to part, already possessed such hold on his heart that made his absence from home even more painful. Therefore, despite his experience and his being older, he found it more difficult to keep his concentration and preserve his internal peace amid all the usual demands of his job. Said in a few words, he suddenly found that being away from his family was a real test to his patience and skills.

However, he had so far succeeded to maintain both his sanity and his performance in place. Nobody who knew him, with the exception perhaps of his own wife, would have noticed anything amiss. That would have been enough, if he had only cared for appearances, but the truth was that he detested the uneasiness that crept beneath his skin every time he found himself alone.

That was exactly his mood when he got to the Savoy after the tiresome evening at Lord C\*\*\*'s dinner party. That was the gathering that his boss and his wife had been so adamant that he should not miss. After all, Alfred Derry, Earl of C\*\*\*, an enthusiastic patron of the performing arts, was throwing that party in honor of the Company to celebrate they had received the royal charter<sup>3</sup> that year. In fact, that dinner party was expected to be one of the most memorable social events in the cultural calendar that season; it was rumored that only the most renown British artists and intellectuals as well as few selected members of the press had been invited. That fact would have been stressful enough for Terrence, but to that grievance, the evening had added the inquisitive presence of Alfred Derry, one of the few people in London who knew too much about the actor's past. The first interactions with the Earl that evening had been a harbinger of a how annoying the rest of the night would be.

"Oh, Mr. Graham," had the mature man said with a hint of amusement as he stressed the name of his interlocutor, "I'm honoured to make your acquaintance, although I must confess, I almost feel like I have met you before".

"The honor is mine, Lord C\*\*\*," replied Terry with flat politeness, "perhaps our paths crossed last year, when I first toured with the Company, during the small season, but had we been *formally* introduced, I'm sure I would remember the occasion", Terrence concluded stressing the word formally, mentally saying to himself that in all honesty such formality had not been considered necessary when the Earl met Terry as a child.

"Then you must forgive this old man, sir, but let us all be merry and celebrate that we have finally met," was Lord C\*\*\*'s elegant response as he turned to the server that passed by them with a silver tray "may I entice you to try this Remy Martin, a real king among cognacs?" Derry asked taking a crystal goblet from the tray.

"That's impressive, not only because of the value of such label, but also for its dark hue. It must be a well-aged one, I say at least 10 years," Terrence noted looking at the liquid moving in Lord C\*\*\*'s glass before he added: "Unfortunately, I will have to decline. I don't drink spirits".

"Now I'm the one to be impressed, Mr. Graham, one seldom encounters a connoisseur who has chosen temperance, let alone an artist such as yourself. That is a rare finding".

"There is no merit in my abstinence. I learned the hard way that my disposition and alcohol can become a dangerous combination, if you understand my meaning, sir".

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<sup>3</sup> A grant that conceded The New Shakespeare Company support from the Crown and the distinction to be known from that time on as the Royal Shakespeare Company.

“I see,” said the Earl with a half smile “now you have piked my interest. Pray tell, where does an artist like you obtain inspiration if spirits are out of the question?”

“The craft evident in the Bard’s texts, your lordship, is a constant source of inspiration for those who care to study them. This is, if they do it with the respect each word deserves,” was Terrence’s neutral response, chosen carefully to move the conversation into the safety of the professional ground.

Despite Terrence’s skillful tactics at dodging prying questions from admirers and reporters, engaging in conversation with Lord C\*\*\* had been exhausting! At every turn, he felt the Earl was in a mission to put in evidence that that a young man of his presence and breeding could hardly be the commoner Terry insisted he was. It was not like Derry was intentionally making his guest feel uncomfortable, but in trying to make a point, he had succeeded in annoying Terrence.

*“What a drag of an old man!”* Terrence thought coming back to the present moment while he turned the key to his suite and entered the darkened rooms. Upon entering the place, he did not know whether he should be relieved or apprehensive. Of course, he was thankful that the dreaded event was over for good, but he hated the feeling of going back to an empty bed.

The curtains in his suite’s parlor were open. So, the lights coming from London Eye on the South Bank lit the room, if only just dimly. Despite the beautiful evening landscape, he felt a bit annoyed that the chambermaid had forgotten to draw the drapes as he had requested. Nevertheless, he was just too tired to do it himself. He crashed on the sofa, while instinctively unbuttoning his waste coat and tossing his Oxfords in the middle of the room. He had never been an untidy man, but that night he was simply beyond his limits. With uncharacteristic laziness, he stretched his legs and put his feet on the tea-table. As he did that, a small envelop that he supposed was a note from his assistant, Mr. McNichols, fell to the floor. Again, he was too tired to even bother about it. In fact, after his body sank in the upholstery, he lay there for over 15 minutes, staring at the city lights over the Thames, his mind and his limbs equally numbed.

He remembered the last time he had been in the same hotel with Candy, when they arrived in England. It had been such a vibrant summer, full of sun and color, a real oddity for London. The warmth of that season seemed so distant now under the bitter cold of December.

*“Yet, if she were with me tonight”,* he thought, *“I wouldn’t mind the cold at all”.*

With a deep sigh he undid his white tie while he counted again the days that were left before the end of his tour, the first of January. After travelling across England, Wales, and

Scotland since November, he still had to stay in London for two additional weeks. This meant that he couldn't spend the holidays at home. Although Candy had insisted that she and Richard would be just fine with Eleanor keeping them company, he was loath to leave them on their own during the holidays. As a matter of fact, against Candy's declared stoicism, he had secretly planned on making at least a couple of quick trips from London to Stratford while he was still performing in Town<sup>4</sup>.

If he left in the morning train during his day off, the young man calculated, he could still get home by noon, spend the night with his family, and then return to London the following morning. Of course, his escapades could neither be on Christmas nor in New Year's Eve, but he would have to do with any other available date, even if it was just to keep his sanity. The more he thought about it, the more decided he was on the scheme . . . but his following day off was still a week away, and it seemed to him that time couldn't move fast enough.

*"If I don't hold them in my arms soon," he told himself, "I shall go mad! At this point, I'm so desperate that I believe I can literally sense Candy's fragrance in this room."*

He closed his eyes to conjure the warmth of her bare skin. It was a trick he had used during his long and hopeless years in New York, and it had again turned out handy in recent days. For a man of his vivid imagination, as any good actor must be, it was not so difficult to mentally reproduce the texture, scent, and flavor of his beloved. Yet, he knew that he shouldn't abuse of that resource. After all, at the very end, it only left him restless and unsatisfied. His now superior knowledge of her had taught him how feeble his imagination could be compared to the experience of her intimate touch. Hence, after a moment of weakness in which Terrence indulged in his vivid recollections, he forced himself to return to reality. He reasoned that a young folk's relief could not be enough for a man; so, he finally left the sofa and dragged himself to the bedroom.

Once in the dark chamber, after almost stumbling with a stranded suitcase in the middle of his way, he walked straight ahead to the bathroom, feeling uneasy with the smell of cigar that impregnated his clothes.

*"Isn't it funny that a scent which I used to enjoy so much is now so disgusting?"* He mentally asked himself while turning on the lights of the bathroom to finish undressing. He remembered that Lord C\*\*\* had found it peculiar that Graham should not only decline to participate in drinking the best cognac but also smoking an exotic Por Larrañaga<sup>5</sup>.

"I am intrigued, Mr. Graham," had the man riposted with an amused chuckle, "you're neither a drinker, nor a smoker, and certainly not a lady's man to judge by the way you have

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<sup>4</sup> London

<sup>5</sup> A Cuban cigar brand.

dodged the advances of every adoring female this very evening. You have reminded me of a good friend of mine who has been gradually giving up these pleasures, but his case doesn't count for he is an old fool, like me. Your case is different, a man as young as you must have a vice or two. What is youth for if not for such indulgences? You are making me wonder what sort of addiction you may be hiding."

Terrence had only grinned mysteriously, vaguely adding that "there are weaknesses that a gentleman should keep only to himself".

One thing was true, Terrence thought as he continued undressing: even if the tobacco hadn't touched his lips, the smell pervaded his garments and hair, which made him decide for a quick shower, no matter how tired he felt.

Once the hot water ran over his body, with the herbal and citric whiff of his soap prevailing over the smell of cigars, his nostrils felt liberated. Only then he became more conscious of other odors that surrounded him.

*"What is that sweet, flowery scent?"* he wondered looking around when he got out of the shower. Unable to find anything new in the room, he imagined that the chambermaid had used a different deodorant in the bathroom, or perhaps it was something they had used to wash the towels. *"Whatever they did,"* he thought slightly annoyed, *"they should consider using a more neutral kind of perfume for their rooms."*

Shrinking his shoulders while he put on the bath robe, the young man internally laughed at his new obsession with odors. He imagined that at such late hour it was better to forget about any complaints he could have and simply go to bed. So, he took the pajama bottoms that McNichols had left for him on the bathroom vanity and put them on but failed to find the top.

*"What bloody hell is going on? Where is that blasted shirt?"* He internally asked. He was puzzled because McNichols had proved being too efficient for such an overt faux pas. How could he have forgotten to leave the whole pajama set ready? He then looked at the watch he had left on the washstand marble counter. It was too late to be fussing for trifles. So, he resolved to forget about the incident and simply get on with his routine.

Trying to speed things up, he towel-dried his hair energetically and brushed his teeth. While he was at that, he looked at his reflection on the mirror and wondered again if sleep would assist him as soon as he wished. He often found that despite feeling tired, he could hardly sleep a few hours every night, since his bed partner was not with him. Then, all of a sudden, just as he put his toothbrush in the glass right in front of him, his eyes looked at a second brush, right next to his, a small one with an ivory handle that was familiar to him.

*“Candy’s toothbrushes are always as tiny as a child’s,”* he smiled . . . then, a fraction of a second after this last thought had been produced, his mind exploded in stupefaction.

Suddenly, the tiny details that had seemed unimportant since he entered the hotel room took new meaning. A flashback of the last time he and Candy had stayed at the Savoy came to his mind. He saw Candy’s face literally beaming, mesmerized by the monumental London Eye over the Thames bank, and he also remembered her insistence in leaving the drapes open to enjoy the view. Then, he realized that McNichols would never leave him a note in a pink envelope, like the one he had carelessly swept off the tea-table. Next, he also recalled that his meticulous secretary had taken care of keeping all his suitcases inside the closet. So, what on Earth was that small suitcase doing in the middle of the way just a while ago? Wasn’t that sweet smell in the bathroom just like the perfume in baby’s talcum powder? . . . What about the rose scent on the sofa? . . . And last but not least, what was Candy’s toothbrush doing right in front of his eyes?

With his heart in his throat, the young man opened the door almost violently. Even if the light coming from the bathroom illuminated the adjacent chamber only partially, Terrence’s eyes could now see the figure of his wife, sleeping peacefully on his bed. She was lying on her usual side of the bed, opposite the bathroom, and next to her side, on a wood stand, rested a Moses basket decorated with white lace. If Terrence’s heart had not already been snatched by his wife long time before, the very moment he saw her sleeping there would have been a good time for her to steal it.

Still in awe, the young man stood motionless for a good number of seconds, before he could actually loosen his grip on the bathroom doorknob. When he finally managed to command his muscles to move, he first shook his head in disbelief, a soft smile coming to the surface of his lips. Next, he slowly walked around the bed to approach the Moses basket. With hesitant hands he lifted the lace veil that covered the baby’s bedding just enough to peek at the tiny sleeping form that lay inside. Light was scarce, but the view was luminous enough for the eyes of the proud young father. He stood motionless at the sight of his first-born son, wondering at how the babe had changed and grown in just six weeks. Terrence would have liked to take Richard in his arms and look right into his eyes that he imagined beautiful, but he knew well that babies are best left undisturbed when they finally fall asleep. So, drawing the veil, he let young Richard to his surely innocent dreams.

“Isn’t he beautiful?” a hushed feminine voice woke him up from his reverie.

He then raised his eyes, to see his wife sitting on the bed, propped on her right elbow. She had just turned the night lamp next to her and its soft light was accentuating the mop of tight golden curls that adorned her head. Terrence was already lost just by the sight of that



stray ringlet that sensuously fell upon her forehead when her lips hinted a mischievous smile. It was obvious that she was enjoying her frolic way too much for his taste. Never one to feel comfortable when being at the receiving end of a prank, even if this was the sweetest one ever, Terrence decided to ignore his urgent need to run to the bed to hold her tightly. Instead, he slowly walked around the bed until he reached his own side. He stood there, crossing his arms on his chest, as if ready to scold a child.

“So, madam,” he said in the same whispered tone Candy had used, “how do you plan to atone for your sins?”

“Pray tell what sins you are talking about,” she replied while she observed him take off the bathrobe and get on the bed with the attitude of a great cat stalking his pray.

“Oh dear!” He exclaimed stretching his legs on the bed while supporting his weight on his left arm, “When did you become such a shameless sinner? Do I really need to number your offenses?”

Candy’s smile grew wider, showing her dimples, which almost made Terrence desist on his game and move on to kissing her as if there was no tomorrow. But true to his combative nature, the man did not give up so soon.

“Go ahead, enlist my trespasses,” she instigated him.

“Well, to begin with, isn’t a lady “in confinement” supposed to stay at home?” he asked rolling his tongue over the démodé euphemism to refer to pregnancy.

“My confinement, as you call it, is over. I saw Dr. Monroe just yesterday and he said I was ready to reassume my normal life, and all the activities implied . . . if you know what I mean?”

He raised his left eyebrow, in an effort to suppress a smile, as he had clearly understood her meaning.

“Interesting. . .” he replied hiding his excitement, “but still, that surely is not an excuse to invade my room without proper notice.”

“Oh, that?” she pretended to gasp in surprise.

“Yes, how do you respond to that?”

“That is called giving someone you hold dear a surprise. This is, you hope this person would be pleasantly surprised to see you, even if the visit is unexpected. . . were you? . . . you know . . . pleasantly surprised?” she asked with the same playful tone, but slightly softened with tenderness.

“I’m still to assess that. Let’s say that perhaps I am, but still, can you explain now what has happened with Eleonor? Have you abandoned her in Stratford? And how did you sneak into my chambers? How can the hotel administration run a place such as this with such a poor security system? It seems that any trespasser can get into one’s room!”

“Oh, what an implacable interrogator you are, sir? You surely have a bright future as law enforcer” she mocked him, “Of course, I did not abandon your sweet mother,” she responded with fake indignation, “she came with me to London and is now staying at Mrs. Taylor’s home. By the way, that good lady has invited us to spend Christmas and New Year’s Eve at her place. Nothing fancy. Just a true family gathering. And I was able to enter in your room because I called Mr. McNichols to let him know of my intentions”.

“All right”, he appeared to relent for second, only to charge again, “but all these scheming does not give you the excuse to leave that dreadful little suitcase of yours on my way. I almost fell on my nose just a while ago”.

“I’m really sorry about that”, she replied, this time genuinely embarrassed, “but there wasn’t any more room in the closet. I mean, I managed to fit most of my things, but that case is for Richard’s stuff, and it simply wouldn’t fit anywhere. Besides, ‘his majesty’ needs to be changed several times a day; so, it is just better to have it handy at all times.”

“Well, I will let you go with that one, but then, if you were planning on coming to me on this day, why didn’t you come earlier and attend to Lord C\*\*\*’s reception with me? I resent that you were sleeping here while I was dying of boredom and annoyance at that insufferable man’s party,” he spat with a smirk while crossing his arm over his chest once again.

“Terry, as much as I would have liked to be with you tonight, it’s still too early for me to attend a formal social gathering of such length. Unlike most ladies, I do nurse our child myself, and since he needs to be fed every three hours, I cannot possibly be away from him for as long as a formal dinner would require.”

“You seem to have an excuse for each one of my complaints, but I still have one more thing against you, young lady.”

“Oh really?”

“Haven’t I told you not to take my pajamas top? I think we have gone over that issue before, at least a dozen times. Come on, give it back to me,” he said with a tone of voice that sounded more like sensual provocation than a complaint.

Candy laughed while her eyes lit with a mischievous light.

The following Wednesday, a young couple was strolling through the busy lanes of the old Spitalfields Market, as they pushed a pram. The young woman, who was no other than Candy, stopped for a while at a produce stand seeking for ingredients that Ms. Baker and



Candice rotated her body softly from left to right as she held little Richard. With the head comfortably nested on his mother's shoulder, the baby was half falling asleep, half processing his latest meal. A soft burp finally emerging from his lips told the young mother that it was time to work more intently in inducing sleep. So, she sat in the nearby rocking chair and spent some time moving back and forth, humming sweetly. When she was sure her lullaby had the intended effect, she laid the baby's body on the bed and left him to rest, while she came downstairs to join the adults.

When she entered the parlor, the Taylors and their guests were engaged in a lively conversation about a shocking painting exhibition that had taken place in Paris the month before. A young Spanish painter had especially captivated Mr. Taylor's admiration in his last visit to France.

"Descriptions are futile. One must see his paintings to fully grasp what this painter's work can evoke in the soul. It is like being in the middle of a dream, truly", said Taylor with excitement.

"A good dream, I hope," prompted Ms. Baker with a smirk.

"Not always, Eleanor. Some of them are confusing, mind-bending to say the least," replied Taylor.

"Now that is intriguing", interjected Terrence with interest, "the stuff nightmares are made of is certainly something that I'd like to explore more, for character-building purposes," he explained, "you said his name was Dali, right?"

As Taylor nodded in agreement, Candy interjected while she took her place by her husband's side:

"I just hope you are not planning to hang a nightmare in our living room, Terry", she said with a smile that gave away she was speaking in jest.

Candy rested her head on her husband's shoulder with an affectionate gesture that was immediately reciprocated by Terrence's arm that found its place around her shoulders. Mrs. Taylor and Ms. Baker exchanged knowing glances and a fleeting smile at the sight of the young couple's spontaneous display of affection.

"Don't worry, Freckles," he responded to his wife's banter, "Interior decorator is not part of my job description. So, rest assured I will allow you to make your own choices. . . but.

"Oh no! I think I knew a 'but' was coming," Candy said rolling her eyes dramatically.

"Well, hear me out, madam, I will make one single suggestion, just this time", he began with a smile that was repressing laughter from breaking out loud.

“Oh Eleanor! Help me here!” Candy shrieked comically. The older members of their small audience looked at the couple with merriment.

“See that big package wrapped in brown paper, under the tree, Freckles?” he asked pointing to the Christmas tree in the living room.

Candy’s eyes opened wide, realizing that her husband was not kidding.

“Are you suggesting we start opening presents, Mr. Graham?” she asked, as she turned to see the Taylors, asking permission to their host with her expressive eyes.

“By all means, Can . . .” had Alicia Talyor began saying but before she could finish the sentence, the young woman literally flashed from her seat to the base of the tree to extract the present Terrence had pointed to.

Terrence couldn’t hold his chuckles at Candy’s childish enthusiasm and the rest of the audience followed. The young woman, sitting down on the floor, occupied herself in tearing the modest wrapping that covered the rectangular package with gleeful giggles. However, once her eyes could see the content of the package, she became suddenly silent. Then her eyes filled with tears.

For the Taylors and Ms. Baker, it was clear now that the gift was a painting, but as Candy was holding it towards herself, they couldn’t see the composition that was moving her to tears. They were intrigued to say the least.

After a brief second, Candy lifted her eyes, first looking towards Terrence and then to the other people in the room.

“This is my childhood home . . . my beloved Pony’s Home?” she said with a throated voice, her tears now running freely down her cheeks.

Realization now sank into Eleanor’s mind and her face showed it.

Candy lifted her eyes, saying a mute thank you to her husband, and then, seeing Eleanor’s questioning look, she stood up and showed the painting to her and the Taylors. To this, the story of a small orphanage on the American midwestern countryside ensued, engrossing the audience with the warmth and pure affection Candy felt for her childhood home. Terrence followed the scene in silence, delighting in the pleasure of having been the means that had brought such a modest and at the same time precious object into Candy’s hands.

*“Making you happy . . .”* he thought, *“It’s almost a selfish endeavour, as it makes me so happy in return”.*

When she finished her story, Candy came back to her place by Terry's side, still holding the piece.

"How on Earth did you find this, my love?" she finally had the presence of mind to ask.

"At Spitalfields, the other day we went together, remember?" he asked with a calm expression but with a spark still twinkling in his eyes.

"But, how . . . when . . . I never saw . . ."

"Well, you were too busy bargaining for vegetables; so, I wandered through the antique stands and found it. I was as surprised as you are now," he replied and then, seeing that Candy's questioning look had not disappeared from her face, he added: "To make it a true surprise, I paid a messenger to bring it wrapped and all to Mr. and Mrs. Taylor's home".

Alicia nodded when Candy looked at her, silently accepting she had played a part in that story as well.

"Now, may I ask you a question about this piece?" Terrence interjected while pointing to the signature on the painting, "Do you have any idea who the painter could be? This person clearly knew the place many years ago because, as you just explained, the house is not so small anymore."

Candy looked at the signature for the first time and a small cry scaped from her throat.

"Slim! I can't believe it!" she said, "He, he was a very small child, you see, when I left Pony's Home the first time. He was always drawing, with those little hands of his . . . such a sensitive child, with beautiful brown eyes. Years later, Miss Pony told me she regretted that the boy had been adopted by a blacksmith. She was afraid that in that household the child would not be encouraged to explore his natural talents."

"But he obviously did," rejoined Eleanor, "When the passion comes from within, there's nothing that can stop it from emerging and flourishing" she added looking at her son meaningfully. The young man returned her look with a brief smile.

"True!" agreed James Taylor, "But the coincidence still baffles me. What are the odds that the work of this young man would end up in a market at the other side of the Atlantic, and that Terrence would find it for you. If I were a fiction writer, I think I wouldn't resist the temptation of turning this event into a whole short story . . .who knows, even a novel".

"Then, in that story, you should add that this painting is even more surprising than a surrealist dream," concluded Terrence, "And I already have an idea of where we could hang it".

As they did, Candy kissed her husband cheek and then gave yet another look at the painting, imagining her younger self sneaking out of the house to wash Slim's wet bedding.

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Eleanor, Candy, and Mrs. Leveridge, the housekeeper, were doing the dishes amid their jolly chit-chat. The Grandchesters had held an intimate gathering to celebrate Terrence's twenty-ninth birthday with only their small staff and Ms. Baker, each one of them sharing the same table as equals. Candy's heart was still processing the endearing memories that have just been created that evening. She briefly remembered her old system for marking days on her calendar to distinguish bad days from uneventful ones using white and black stars. She hadn't thought in that method in years. She mused that her life as Terrence's wife was so different from the difficult times at the Lagans' household that, if she were going to use a similar system now, she would have to come up with new symbols.

*"Perhaps I would use blue stars for good ones and gold stars for those days that are outright marvellous," she thought.*

With the back of her mind, she saw Terrence's face during the meal that evening. As reserved as he usually was, this occasion he couldn't prevent his heart's content from becoming evident in his eyes. Seeing him so evidently happy, at ease, and open to receive the appreciation of those around him was Candy's dream come true.

*"Whenever Terry is happy, that day is a gold star day for me!" she thought.*

The three women continued with their task until the kitchen was clean as a whistle. Mrs. Leveridge said her farewells and only Ms. Baker and Candy lingered for a little longer. Candy was taking a respite in her motherly duties since Terrence had claimed the privilege of putting the baby to sleep. Therefore, Candy thought this was the perfect occasion to revisit the conversation she and Eleanor had left unfinished a couple of months before.

“This has been a wonderful evening, Eleanor. I’m so glad you were able to stay for Terry’s birthday and help me make this a memorable occasion. Last year, you were out of town, and I made a whole mess picking a fight with him that blew everything up!” she said with a pout.



"I you two fought, I'm sure Terry was not entirely without blame and perhaps," the woman here made a pause as a knowing smile appeared on her lips, "perhaps the reconciliation that I'm sure followed made-up for the missed opportunity. Isn't that so?"

"Well . . . you are not . . . entirely mistaken", Candy replied with a blush, "Yet I like it best when he is as happy as he was today, without any drama. Thanks for being here to make this day so perfect. I only wish you could stay for Richard's Christening as well".

"I'm so sorry, but my agent has been pressing me to return to deal with a myriad things, darling. And I have this new project I mentioned before, producing a play on my own. I cannot longer postpone those obligations".

"Sure, I understand you are a busy person. It is only that I love having friends and family around us. Albert is coming and . . ." at this point Candy stopped and took a deep breath, "speaking of family, Eleanor, have you thought about the conversation we had last November? If you are still undecided, I would understand. I was just wondering," she closed her sentence lowering her voice, truly embarrassed to bring up the subject.

"About that," Eleanor said trying to force a smile that the expression in her eyes did not support, "I have discussed the matter with," she paused briefly, "with those people that could give me some counsel, and consider the ramifications, you see".

Candy held her breath, thinking that so much prefacing could not be the harbinger of a positive answer.

"After much thinking," the older woman continued, "I decided that I want to be part of little Rick's life, as his grandmother, but the word itself is too long and harsh to the ears, don't you think?"

"And how do you want to be called, then?" asked Candy with a smile.

"Well, my brother and I used this Southern nickname for our paternal grandmother. You see, she was from Charlotte, in North Carolina. So, she taught us to call her Mimi, which is another shortened name for Grandma. I think Mimi is much sweeter and easier for a young child to pronounce. I'd like to be Mimi for your children," concluded Eleanor.

"So, Mimi, it is," replied Candy, sensing that there was more to that choice that met the eye, but respected it, nonetheless.

The two women remained in the kitchen a little longer, talking about the preparations for Eleanor's departure the following week. Eleanor preferred not to make her farewells linger. So, it was decided that she would say her goodbyes to the Grahams in Stratford and McNichols would drive her to Southampton, where she would board the liner that would

*The family, of course, does not know the particulars and motivations of this decision. I trust your lordship will keep it confidential. I hope these measures will help Mr. G. have more time to consider what is best for him and his family. He is still young, hotheaded, and perhaps still resented towards your lordship and everything you represent. But time can heal some wounds. So, perhaps it is not too late to achieve the future you desire for your House. As I close this letter, I entreat you to dispose of it according to our agreement.*

*Best regards,*

*E. B.*

After reading the letter for the third time, Richard Grandchester threw the paper and envelope to the fire. In the darkness of his bedchamber, a solitary tear, carrying inside the dark waves of an ocean of regrets and guilt, ran down his cheek.