

The MANTELPIECE

Issue 11

Literary Magazine

May 2024





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Spring Awakening

A Season of Rebirth and Reflection

As the chill of winter recedes, giving way to the gentle embrace of spring, the literary world, too, experiences a season of awakening. The motif of spring has long fascinated writers and poets, symbolizing rebirth, renewal, and the vibrant dance of life itself. This spring, let us delve into the profound connections between the season and the act of writing, exploring how the thawing landscapes inspire narratives of growth, transformation, and new beginnings.

The thawing of snow and the budding of flowers are not just physical phenomena but potent symbols of change and possibility. In literature, spring often heralds a time of emotional and psychological awakening for characters, mirroring the natural world's transition from dormancy to life. It is a period rich with the potential for new stories and the reimagining of old ones, offering writers a canvas painted with the hues of hope and the promise of new life.

For writers, spring can serve as a muse, inviting them to break free from the confines of their own winters—be they creative blocks or personal challenges—and embrace a season of productivity and creativity. The world around us, blooming in a symphony of colors and scents, beckons us to pen tales that capture the essence of renewal and the sheer joy of being alive.

Furthermore, spring challenges us to reflect on the themes of rebirth in our own works. Just as nature cyclically rejuvenates itself, so too can our writing evolve, shedding the old to make way for the new. It is a time to revisit unfinished projects with fresh eyes, to revise and reshape our narratives, drawing inspiration from the world's awakening around us.

This season also serves as a reminder of the impermanence of all things. Just as the beauty of spring is transient, so too are the moments we capture in our writing. This

awareness can imbue our work with a sense of urgency and a desire to capture the fleeting beauty of the world, to tell stories that resonate with the vibrancy and fragility of life itself.

Indeed, the communal aspect of the spring awakening cannot be overstated. This vibrant season beckons not just a transformation of the earth but a flourishing of literary communities. Spring ushers in a myriad of literary festivals, workshops, and gatherings, each a verdant field for the seeding of ideas and the nurturing of creative spirits. It's a time when writers, poets, editors, and readers converge, drawn together by the shared passion for the written word and the collective excitement that warmer days and blooming landscapes inspire.

“In the spirit of spring, let us continue to grow, to change, and to bloom, both as writers and as individuals.”

These gatherings are more than mere events; they are the heartbeats of the literary world, pulsating with the potential for new connections and the deepening of established ones. They serve as reminders that while the act of writing is often a journey taken alone, the broader voyage of bringing words to life is a communal endeavor. Here, amidst panels and readings, casual conversations, and serendipitous meetings, the solitary nature of writing gives way to the joy of shared experiences and mutual understanding.

Moreover, these festivals and gatherings are fertile ground for inspiration. They are spaces where writers can step out of their

everyday environments and immerse themselves in a collective energy that fuels creativity. It's where the exchange of ideas is as free-flowing as the spring rivers, enabling authors to explore new genres, themes, and perspectives, or perhaps to find the courage to tackle challenging topics that were previously daunting.

Collaboration, too, finds a strong foothold in these settings. Writers meet illustrators, poets cross paths with playwrights, and novelists converse with biographers, often leading to unexpected partnerships that blend talents and genres in innovative ways. The celebration of new works—those tender shoots emerging from the fertile soil of spring's inspiration—gains a special vibrancy in this atmosphere, where each new piece is a testament to the power of renewal and the endless possibilities inherent in the act of creation.

As we revel in the communal festivities of spring, let us also pause to appreciate the underlying significance of these gatherings. They are a reminder of the resilience of the literary community, its ability to regenerate and inspire, much like the season itself. In this spirit of renewal and connection, let us forge ahead, nurturing the seeds of new projects and friendships, and watching as they blossom into works of profound beauty and impact, under the nurturing light of our shared literary sun.

Let our writing be a reflection of the world's renewal, a testament to the enduring power of stories to capture the heart of human experience. May we all find in this season a wellspring of creativity, propelling us forward in our literary endeavors with renewed vigor and enthusiasm. In the spirit of spring, let us continue to grow, to change, and to bloom, both as writers and as individuals. Let the literary world awaken to the possibilities that lie before us, ready to be explored and celebrated in the pages of our collective narrative. □ *L.H.*

The Mockingbird and Me

Blair Glaser



Illustration: LukaszDesignr / Adobe Stock

REER. REER. REER. Was that a car alarm bringing me out of a surface sleep? Was I dreaming, back in Brooklyn, in the 90s? No. As I lay there I realized it was April 2020, and, as one piercing bird cry morphed into another, the screech was no car. My husband and I, recent transplants from New York to Los Angeles, had noticed the frenzied song of the mockingbird during the day, but being kept up at night by a bird right outside our window was new.

I wasn't sleeping well, but the mockingbird's manic repertoire, sung daily at 2 am, further wrecked any hope of a restful night. I shuffled into our small office where the computer cast a violet hue on our bare white walls, on the folded triangular masks

hanging from the doorknob, on clusters of hand sanitizer, and my slumped shoulders. I wanted to know why a bird might be imitating a car alarm in the middle of the night. Google taught me the mockingbird's nocturnal montage is not one of joy, but of desperation. Young males who haven't yet found a mate frantically sing to protect their territory and increase their chances of love.

As I slipped back into bed, the mockingbird's song, overshadowing the rumblings of my husband's wine-soaked snore, did sound desperate:

Oriole, car alarm, killdeer, wren! Oriole, car alarm, killdeer, wren!

Staring at the ceiling, the desperation of our daily lives presented itself in bold relief:

Don a mask, walk the dog, meet on Zoom, TV. Shop for food, cook the food, clean up, repeat.

My husband and I shared in the world's pandemic shock, terror and grief. People we loved started losing people they loved. So we sat. We sat and fretted, sat and zoomed, sat and ate; we spent so much time sitting and staring—at the phone, at the computer screen, at streaming series and self-taped videos of overworked hospital employees on the TV—that I awoke one morning to find my body in a twisted knot, and hobbled around the apartment like Al Pacino playing *Richard the III*.

When my mother-in-law died alone in a nursing home in Connecticut, I wanted to cry but there was an N-95 between me and my grief, me and the world. The inner mask made everything look like there was a screen door in front of it. Even though we lived in sunny LA, the days were gray. June Gloom had come early to offer the perfect backdrop for our collective mood. My husband and I paced (and hobbled) around the apartment, and watched 10 seasons of *Shark Tank* while washing dishes. Our grief and isolation rendered everything flat.

But as new residents in a small apartment with Vanna White, our anxious American Eskimo dog, our isolation was noisy. Up until that point, Vanna had only lived in houses, and did not understand that the entire apartment complex wasn't her territory. Every time someone opened a door in our thin-walled, four apartment unit, she went berserk, screeching high-pitched barks that made us and our neighbors fume. While she slept, the mockingbird started up.

On our hobby walks, I noticed that people had started gathering in backyards, on patios, in parks, and for dinner. They took risks. I craved interaction. I wondered: Could I crash a party, bake goods for my irritated neighbors even though I don't

bake, or *somehow find some friends*, and still protect my home, my *territory*, from that deadly disease?

The mockingbird and I were in a holding pattern.

One afternoon in the summer of 2020 we escaped the apartment and took Vanna to Malibu for a picnic. We sat on a cliff and gazed out at golden baubles of sun bouncing off the Pacific.

“What are you thinking,” my husband asked.

“Oh,” I replied. “You know.”

I was daydreaming about my first move to LA after college to be an actress and live with my philandering mogul-bound boyfriend. Back then, I ended up staring down a handful of stolen pills, searching for a vodka chaser to end it all. But instead of ending things, I chanted a mantra I’d learned on an odd senior year date, and everything changed. I felt ecstatic, and wanted to keep feeling that way, so I dropped acting and joined a spiritual community. Very cliché, I know. But being in Malibu with my husband reminded me of being in Malibu back then, when my new friends and I threw coconuts—a symbol of the ego—off a cliff, hoping our egos would crack open in unison on the jagged rocks below. I replayed the ritual in my mind like a reel. I was being vague with my husband, because I feared that giving voice to that feeling of elation and possibility all mixed up in that salty air from thirty years ago would render it childish.

Nevertheless, as we moved through the days, I lingered on memories from my first LA life like love letters rediscovered in the back of a drawer. LA freeways are rarely empty, but during the pandemic they were scarily so, and whenever we were on them it conjured flashbacks of driving my red Subaru Coupe down the empty 10 freeway at dawn to attend an early morning chant at the meditation center. I relived watching the quiet world come alive, moving from dark to lighter blue, and remembered feeling my soul brighten along with the sky.

On my daily hobbles to the Santa Monica bluffs with Vanna, I reflected on a spiritual teaching I heard often in those years: the soul was like a drop of water and the goal was to merge into the oneness of the ocean. While Vanna and I stared out at the sea, I tried to make sense of it. I caught fleeting glimpses of a vast oneness that I had exper-

rienced via chanting and meditation when I was 22. I never imagined being a fifty-one-year-old woman mining her twenties for inspiration, but there it was.

During the day, a craving for some inner peace, tranquility, transcendence—*how to put a non-verbal experience into words?*—and an actual community, pulsed through me. I had to figure out how to get back to the ecstasy I had accessed in my youth, and move forward at the same time. I tried to meditate but it was impossible; my mind was so scattered I could barely read. I thought about sitting down to chant, but I couldn’t risk upsetting my neighbors with even more noise than Vanna’s bark.

At night I wondered what would happen to the mockingbird if his chant didn’t bring a mate. We all know desperation is bad for dating. Would he serenade himself to death?

One morning, I noticed I hadn’t heard him at night in a while. Mating season ended. Mockingbirds don’t migrate, but ours had moved down the block. In the warm green autumn, I listened for him during the day, and occasionally caught his song between the chatty crows.

A dear East Coast friend showed up on FaceTime, a snowy backdrop on the screen behind her pajama-topped torso. “It’s too cold here. But you get to be outside every day.”

“Well,” I replied. “I’m jealous that you have friends to see when you do go outside.”

“You need to meet my friend Linda,” she said, before hanging up and introducing us via email.

I met Linda in early 2021 at an outdoor cafe. I wanted to hug her the minute I saw her, but I held back. She is twenty years older but has the energy of a bubbly six-year-old: she smiled as if her whole body, not just her mouth, was grinning. Colorful characters—a woman in a tie-dyed muumuu, a well-tattooed skateboarder, and a bare-chested guy awkwardly carrying a surfboard—whooshed by us on the sidewalk. We laughed about the ridiculousness of life. We recognized in each other a true friend. As the afternoon wore on, I heard the call of a mockingbird.

“What’s with these mockingbirds? And going crazy at night?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. They’re territorial. I wrote a book about mockingbirds,” Linda said.

An interesting coincidence. And when those memories of my first move to LA came tumbling out into our convo, it turned out, she, too, had followed *the same* guru: more interesting.

“Such a shame about Baba,” I said, testing to see what she would say about one of the gurus in our former practice. He had been accused of molesting young women. No. He *had* molested them, we knew. And his successor, my teacher, didn’t come clean about it, leaving the victims to manage their betrayal alone. And the teachers did other abusive things—scolding people publicly, kicking certain people out—the kinds of things that come with culty practices and leaders who claim to be enlightened.

“Such a shame,” Linda agreed. She didn’t practice anymore either.

Linda enveloped me in the arms of friendship and included her best friend Rhoda, another former guru follower, in the embrace. Rhoda was a therapist; I had been a therapist. The uncanny commonalities left me standing in a stream of serendipity: I mean, what were the odds? This dose of wonder at finding like and welcoming minds softened the pandemic clench of my jaw, and I felt the inner mask shift.

Spring came round again, and I met Linda and Rhoda for lunch at an outdoor café. I’d been up the night before, listening to the return of the mockingbird and reading an internet article, [13 Spiritual Meanings of Mockingbird](#), which was full of fortune-cookie wisdom: *Good luck will soon knock on your door. You are well protected.* I fantasized about getting an early shot of the vaccine. But number six grabbed me by the throat: *Speak your mind when the opportunity strikes.*

When our napkins were crumpled on our empty plates and we leaned back in our chairs, the energy dipping as we silently contemplated the rest of the day’s tasks, opportunity struck.

“It may sound crazy,” I said, jiggling the ice in my glass. “But I miss it. Our guru did some pretty shitty things, but I miss the access to the community, to the Me beyond my mind. There was something real about that ecstasy, something I could use now.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, too,” Linda said. A masked waiter dropped the check, and the three of us stared at it.

“Would you be open to trying chanting and meditating together?” I asked.

Refugee

Shoba Narayan

A few weeks later, Rhoda and I walked through Linda's yard to her office. I gasped. The beauty of LA never fails to catch me off guard: the endless horizon over the Pacific, the glimpse of snow-capped mountains in the distance, the Valley extending beyond the cliff of Linda's yard and the bursts of fuschia, peach and violet blossoms in her garden.

And so much light.

The landscape made me wonder if this reignited longing to experience the contours of my soul was inspired by Covid, or California.

Once inside the studio, the familiar and comforting scent of incense welcomed us. I'd managed to get some old kirtan CDs loaded up on my phone, and as our guru's voice rang out from my phone's tinny speaker, I was both back there in the 90s and in my new life. Vibration churned, like my insides were going through the washing machine, and came up through my body and out into the world in melodious Oms. I found myself swaying, and when the chant subsided, I descended into a spacious pool of meditation.

There was no N-95 blocking me from myself. My mind was still, a lake on a windless day; and the world looked clear. In the dissolution of my habitual despair I found the forgiving pulse of silent awareness.

My new friends and I now meet for a monthly ritual we call Chant n' Tate, and after those practices, we do a deep-dive catch up—the real stuff—over a homemade lunch. Our meetings, without gurus or groupthink, remind me that the truer purpose of spirituality is not to escape life, but to help us bear it.

Shortly after I received my second shot of the vaccine, a mockingbird established territory on an electric pole down the block. His song was faint, and didn't wake me, but I was up in the wee hours and heard him anyway. Was he aware of his yearning, or was his song pure instinct? Maybe, I thought, as the wren, alarm, jay and chickadee calls cascaded though his little body, the mockingbird doesn't feel the panic he expresses. Maybe, as he releases a torrent of sound, his desperation gives way to euphoric vibrations moving swiftly through his feathers. Maybe, as the mockingbird chants, he is—spiritually speaking—more ocean than fowl. □

Yesterday, my neighbor told me
that bulldozers had unleashed bandicoots on our street.
They strutted fearlessly on the sidewalk, she said
like fashion models.
Even the feral cats fled.

We frowned at the tall-walled construction site
wishing...willing...hoping that the skeletal cement limbs
and puppet-angled cranes moving inside
would disappear...poof!
or at least
turn to ashes under our fiery third-eye gaze
giving us back the green wildness that it once was.

The rodent appeared. Tentative. Sniffing.
Hugging the section where sidewalk met street.

"Shoo," we cried.
Stamping our feet like warriors before a fight.

Her nostrils flared. Her tail quivered.
She didn't move.

There she was. A refugee
who had lost her home to rubble and smoke.

Hated by her new neighbors
who were forced to take her in.

Savoring the Pages

The Enduring Relevance of Food Books

Hector Jean Fournier



Photo: Rawpixel/ Adobe Stock

In an era where digital content swiftly flashes before our eyes, often leaving little lasting impact, the tangible and immersive experience offered by food and food books stands out as a bastion of depth and endurance. These books transcend the conventional recipe format to serve as rich tapestries that intertwine diverse threads of culture, history, personal anecdotes, and the refined art of cooking. Each page is not just a method to prepare food, but a story waiting to be told—a narrative steeped in the traditions of past

generations and the innovative visions of modern chefs. Food books do more than instruct; they inspire, provoke thought, and nurture a profound appreciation for the culinary arts. They beckon us to decelerate our hectic lives, to immerse ourselves fully in the act of cooking, and to reflect thoughtfully on our relationship with food.

Through this slower, more deliberate engagement, these books encourage us to ponder the roots of our meals, the journeys of ingredients from soil to plate, and the cultural significance behind each dish

we prepare and consume. This depth of engagement offers a grounding contrast to the ephemeral nature of much of today's media, providing a lasting value that enriches our understanding of not only what we eat but also the broader context of our dining practices within the tapestry of human experience.

The Narrative of Cuisine

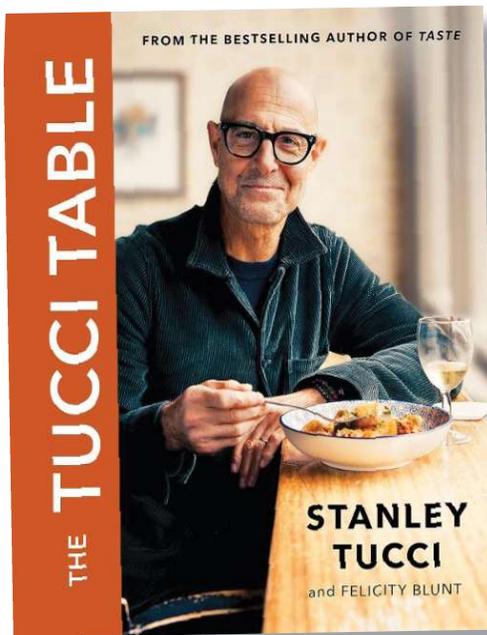
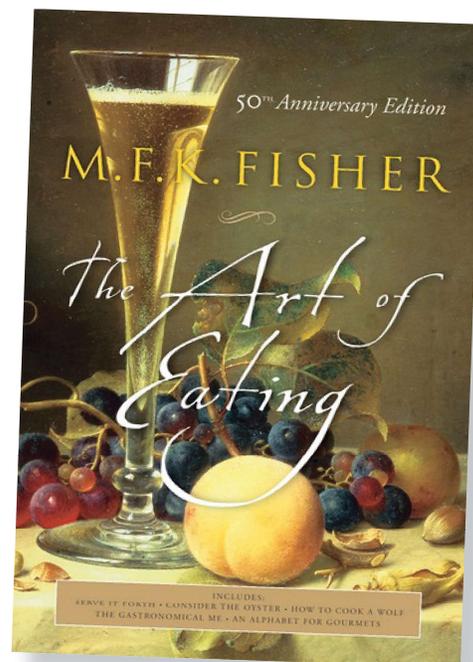
Food serves as one of the most fundamental expressions of human culture and identity. Each recipe, each

ingredient carries echoes of history, stories of survival, celebrations, and migrations. This is where food books come into play—they do not simply catalog recipes; they narrate the story of human civilization through its kitchens.

Take, for example, M.F.K. Fisher’s “The Art of Eating,” a seminal work that blends personal reflections with culinary

the culinary industry are both educational and deeply entertaining. This insider’s perspective turns every meal crafted from the book’s recipes into a richer experience—a layer of understanding that a straightforward cooking demonstration cannot provide.

Marco Pierre White’s “White Heat” revolutionized the cookbook genre by combining striking black and white photography with intense, passionate prose about the demands of the culinary world. White’s book is not just a collection of recipes; it’s an artistic expression, a memoir, and a source of inspiration. The emotional intensity and raw energy conveyed through his words and images capture the heart of cooking in a way that video simply cannot.



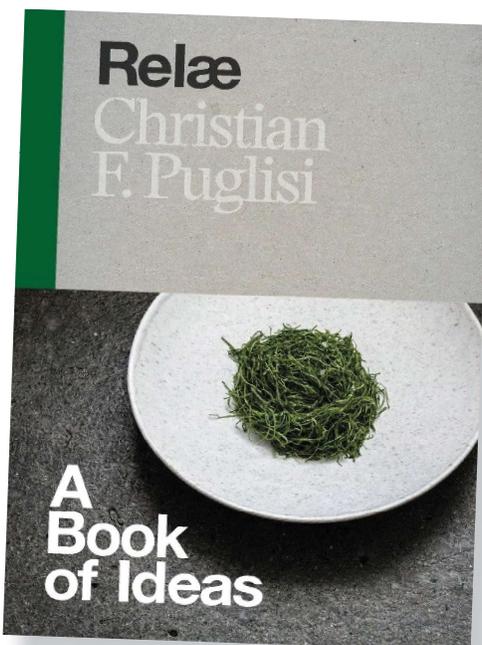
The Personal Touch

“The Tucci Table” by Stanley Tucci masterfully combines personal history with culinary expertise, underscoring the profound connection between food, identity, and familial ties. Each recipe in the book is more than a set of cooking instructions; it is a window into Tucci’s Italian-American heritage, filled with rich anecdotes and vibrant family lore that illuminate the cultural context of the dishes. As Tucci shares memories of family gatherings, holiday feasts, and everyday meals that shaped his upbringing, he invites readers into a world where food is a medium of storytelling and legacy preservation.

These narratives do more than simply accompany the recipes—they breathe life into them, turning each dish into a repository of memories and a celebration of Tucci’s heritage. For instance, a simple pasta recipe is transformed into a tribute to his grandmother, recalling the aromas of her kitchen and the lessons she imparted. Through Tucci’s vivid recounting, readers gain a deeper appreciation for the food, understanding it as a living tradition that has passed through generations. This layer of personal connection encourages readers to engage more deeply with the recipes, not merely as culinary projects but as acts of remembrance and cultural expression.

expertise. Fisher’s prose delves deep into the philosophy of food, exploring its role as a source of pleasure and communion, not merely sustenance. Her writings prompt readers to think about food as an art form and a pivotal element of human connection, themes that are often glossed over in the bite-sized clips of cooking videos online.

Similarly, in “Relæ: A Book of Ideas” by Christian F. Puglisi, we find a chef’s manifesto that challenges conventional culinary norms. Puglisi’s book is both a technical guide and a philosophical treatise that questions the sustainability and ethics of modern cooking practices. The depth of thought and reflection in Puglisi’s work provides a contemplative experience that simple online tutorials cannot replicate.



By integrating these personal and familial elements, Tucci elevates the cookbook from a mere collection of recipes to a heartfelt narrative that honors his Italian-American roots. Each page encourages a celebration of heritage and the shared joy of cooking and eating with loved ones. This intimate approach fosters a unique connection between the author and reader, one that enriches the cooking experience by imbuing it with history, affection, and a sense of continuity. In this way, “The Tucci Table” stands as a testament to the power of food to carry forward personal histories and bind families across generations.

Why Books Over Videos?

While cooking videos on platforms such as YouTube are undeniably convenient, offering visual, step-by-step instructions that users can follow

Culinary Memoirs and Their Impact

The genre of culinary memoirs further illustrates the unique value of food literature. Anthony Bourdain’s “Kitchen Confidential” offers an unvarnished look into the chaotic, passionate world of restaurant kitchens. Bourdain’s sharp, witty narrative and honest anecdotes about

in real-time, they often lack the depth and permanence that books provide. Typically, these videos are crafted with a

pages, each mark telling the story of meals prepared and shared. This wear and tear personalizes a cookbook, making it unique to its owner and imbuing it with memories and experiences. Such physical attributes allow for a personal connection to the material that digital formats, bound by screens and ephemeral as pixels, fail to achieve.

This physical presence also means that cookbooks are often passed down through generations, becoming family heirlooms that carry not just recipes but also the memories and traditions of numerous family meals. This aspect of cookbooks as keepers of family history and personal stories adds another layer of depth that digital media, with its transient nature and lack of physicality, cannot match. Cookbooks are not just collections of recipes; they are archives of personal and cultural histories, cherished and shared from one generation to the next.

In Conclusion

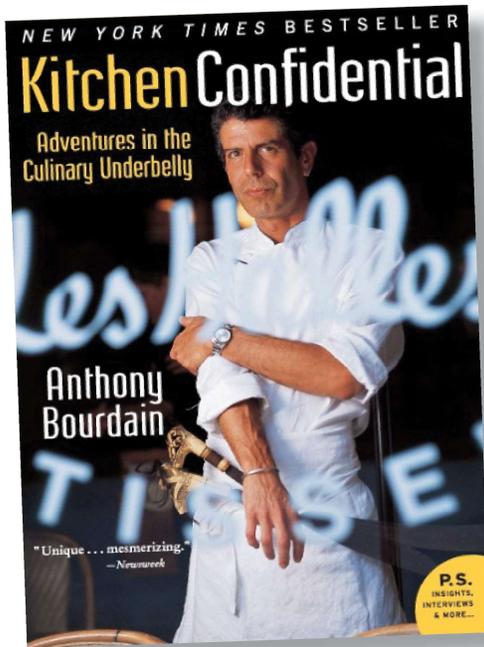
Food books hold an irreplaceable position in the culinary world because they provide something fundamentally different and more profound than what digital formats can offer: depth, continuity, and a tangible sense of connection. These books go beyond mere recipe instruction to delve into the broader context of what we cook and eat, engaging readers with the rich tapestry of culture, history, and personal identity that defines each dish.

As we find ourselves immersed in the quick-paced digital age, the enduring value of food books becomes ever more apparent. They are not merely repositories of culinary methods; they are custodians of heritage and storytelling. Through detailed narratives interwoven with recipes, food books explore the origins of dishes, tracing the influences of various civilizations and migrations, and examining how these culinary practices have shaped, and been shaped by, different cultures throughout history. This deep dive into the cultural backdrop of food provides readers with a greater understanding of the world, seen through the lens of its cuisines.

Moreover, food books foster a personal connection that goes beyond the digital screen. They invite readers to engage actively with their content, prompting not just the creation of meals but also the creation of memories. This engagement is

often reflective and personal, as readers find elements of their own lives and heritage mirrored in the stories these books tell. By bringing to light the personal histories tied to various dishes, food books help solidify one's identity and reinforce the emotional bonds associated with cooking and eating.

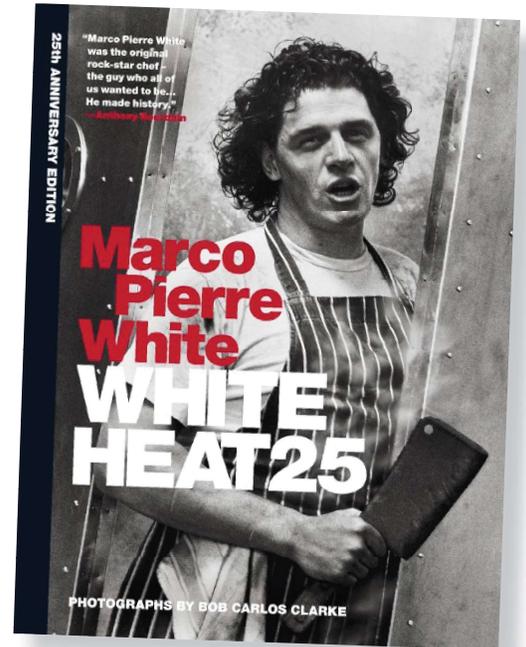
Additionally, the physical nature of food books contributes to their significance. Holding a book, turning its pages, and noting one's own annotations or recipe



focus on quick consumption, prioritizing entertainment and speedy learning over deep, reflective understanding. The fast-paced nature of video content is designed to capture fleeting attention spans, and while effective for quick learning, it does not encourage the repeated, thoughtful engagement that fosters a profound mastery of culinary skills.

Cookbooks, in contrast, offer a more immersive experience. They invite not just a cursory glance but a deep dive into the culinary arts. A cookbook is a resource to which one can return time and again, each visit uncovering new layers of understanding or nuances in technique that were previously overlooked. The physical act of reading, trying recipes, noting adjustments, and repeating this process helps to cement knowledge and skills in a way that transient video content cannot. Like revisiting a favorite novel, each interaction with a cookbook can offer new insights, deepening the reader's appreciation and understanding of culinary arts.

Furthermore, as physical objects, cookbooks possess a tangible presence that digital videos simply cannot replicate. They become part of our home libraries, standing on shelves and becoming integral components of our living spaces. Over time, a well-used cookbook acquires a patina of splatters, stains, and dog-eared



tweaks on the margins create an interactive experience that digital formats struggle to replicate. This tangibility enhances the sense of continuity, as cookbooks often become family heirlooms passed down through generations, each addition or note adding to the family's culinary narrative.

Ultimately, food books remind us that cooking and eating are far more than sustenance or hobby; they are acts rich in narrative potential. Every recipe prepared and shared is a chapter in the larger story of who we are—as individuals, as families, and as part of the broader human community. This narrative art of food, preserved and celebrated in food books, enriches our lives with meaning and connection that the fleeting nature of digital content cannot match. Thus, in the realm of cooking, food books remain an essential and enduring element, nurturing the profound connections and deep understanding that arise from the culinary arts. □

The Ghosts of Max Gate

Rebecca Ruth Gould



Photo: National Trust

Max Gate, the former home of Thomas Hardy, located on the outskirts of Dorchester, Dorset, England.

As I made my way to Max Gate, the home where English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy lived for forty-three years, I marveled at the contrast between the ancient Roman city that used to go by the name of Durnovaria and the ubiquitous signs of capitalist modernity. Located on the outskirts of Dorchester in Dorset County in southern England, Max Gate acquired its name from the name of a gatekeeper of a local toll house, Mack.

Parts of Dorchester reminded me of the California suburbs in which I had grown up: long sidewalks adjacent to grey monotonous roads, car dealerships one after another. Open roadways, minimal public transport, bridges crafted from sheets of metal so high that they blocked the view. An urban infrastructure built for cars. These remnants of capitalist modernity were intermingled with another Dorchester, which accompanied me across my walk from the train station. A Dorchester of Roman walls and buildings dating back to the seventeenth century. A market town that captured Thomas Hardy's imagination and which found its way into many of his novels, albeit under a different name. I could see the magic of this city and understand why it occupied such a central place in Hardy's imagination. The ancient town of Dorchester was large enough to

conjure images of an entire world of people who have passed through the city, and small enough to find a place for one's self within it.

As a trained architect, Hardy built Max Gate with his own hands and according to his own design. Hardy's brother and elderly father helped with the construction. He purchased one-and-a-half acres of land from the Duchy of Cornwall, at a cost of £450, which would be £50,000 in today's money, still an amazing price. The purchase turned out to be even more fortuitous when Hardy discovered that the land he had acquired was filled ancient relics. The workmen who laid the foundation for the house discovered three curled-up skeletons on the grounds where the house was to be built. Hardy marveled at the condition in which the skeletons had been preserved. As he wrote: "Each body was fitted with perfect accuracy into the oval hole, the crown of the head touching the maiden chalk at one end and the toes at the other, the tight-fitting situation being strongly suggestive of the chicken in the egg shell." No doubt delighted with the discovery, Hardy decided to keep the skeletons a secret from his wife, fearing that she might take it as a bad omen.

It was not only skeletons that lay beneath the surface of Hardy's new land. Eight years after the building of the house had begun,

workmen who were digging a drain discovered a huge sarsen stone—the same type of Iron Age stones that comprise Stonehenge—in the middle of the lawn, deep beneath the ground. The stone was so heavy that seven men were needed to move it to the eastern edge of the garden, where it stands now. Hardy’s pride in the discovery is evident from a photo of him standing alongside the stone, which was almost as tall, and certainly heavier, than he was.

Twenty-five years after the discovery of the stone and four years after the death of his first wife Emma, Hardy would pen a poem in her memory that traces the way her shadow used to fall on the stone. He called the poem “The Shadow on the Stone.” It took him two years to complete and another year to publish it, no doubt due to the intensity of the emotions her memory evoked for him. He had not treated her well but was deeply grieved by her death. Here is the first stanza:

I went by the Druid stone
That broods in the garden white and lone,
And I stopped and looked at the shifting shadows
That at some moments fall thereon
From the tree hard by with a rhythmic swing,
And they shaped in my imagining
To the shade that a well-known head and shoulders
Threw there when she was gardening.

II.

As life and circumstances changed, Hardy created new extensions and rooms, thus creating a haphazard effect that has drawn criticism from many visitors and guides. I found the crooked ceilings and extra cupboards of the house to be an instructive allegory for life, a reminder that it rarely turns out as one expects.

I wish I could say that Max Gate radiated happiness, but the more I learn about the lives that passed beneath this roof, the harder it is to see them awash in joy. The home exuded other, no less foundational, emotions: bitterness, regret, old age, as well as nostalgia and a sense of human finitude. While Max Gate was a sad place, the words uttered by Jane Austen’s heroine Anne Elliot in her 1817 novel *Persuasion* tell us much of the beauty that even abodes of sorrow can exclude. “One does not love a place less for having suffered in it,” Anne says, while expressing her desire to return to Lyme Regis, a coastal resort town not far from Dorchester that had been the scene of heartbreak for her. Anne’s words have guided me for decades, and I am touched by the knowledge that, like Hardy’s novels, they too sprang from the soil of Dorset.

I did not love Max Gate less because Hardy and his two wives, Emma and Florence, suffered in it, or because the low ceilings and dark stairwells reminded me of my own mortality. The house reflects a central element in Hardy’s literary aesthetic, a darkness which pervades his novels as well as his poems. The interior is gloomy and dark, casting shadows all around even as it stimulates the imagination. It was even gloomier during Hardy’s lifetime, for he planted several thousand Austrian pine and beech trees soon after moving in, thereby blocking the sunlight and protecting himself and his visitors from passersby. A brick wall later reinforced the separation between the inhabitants of Max Gate and the world outside.

Hardy’s second wife Florence had the trees removed after his death. Although many of its interiors are starved of light, sun enters the house today in strategically arranged locations that attest to

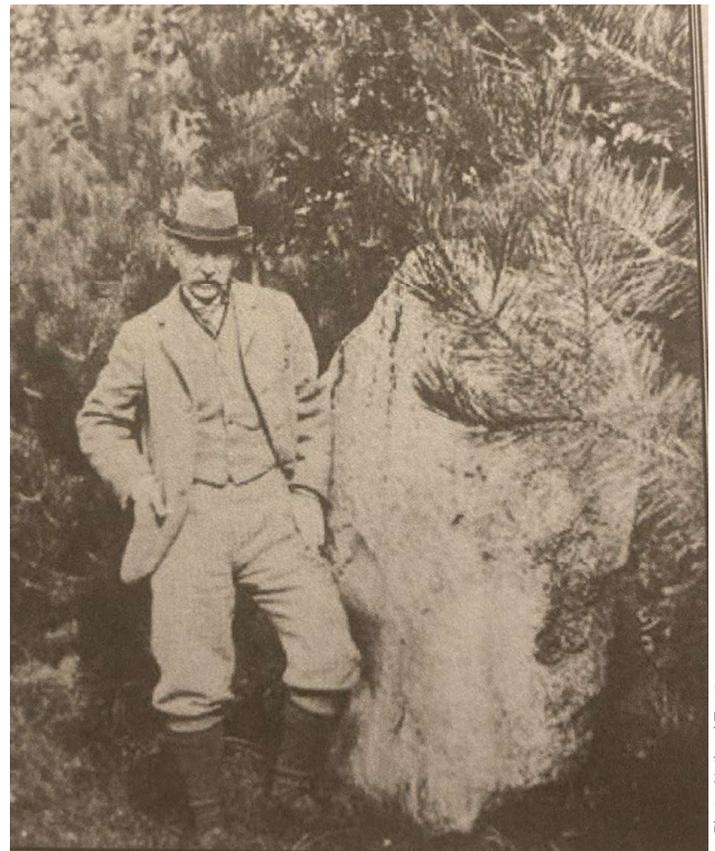


Photo: National Trust

Thomas Hardy standing next to the Druid Stone discovered on his land.

Hardy’s architectural acumen. These include the main staircase, above which hangs an internal window that refract light onto the stairs from another window that faces outside.

Hardy had separate studies for his poetry writing and his prose. The poetry study is the most majestic. With stately pink walls and mahogany bookshelves, the study overlooks a garden that Hardy treasured. Hardy hired a gardener to keep it in good shape and built a cemetery for his pets. Every time a new pet passed away, Hardy personally carved a headstone for them. Time in the poetry study was measured by a tall grandfather clock which beat softly in the background during my visit, reminding me of the perpetual ticking of the electricity meter in my own home.

Max Gate gives all the signs of having been built by someone for whom privacy was at a premium. Even the windows served as barriers between Hardy and the outside world. The wooden shutters over the windows in the dining room have the appearance of retractable walls; they move up and down, covering the windows completely whenever the occasion requires. They came in handy on many occasions: visitors to Dorchester would often arrive uninvited, hoping to sneak a peek at Dorchester’s most famous resident at work. The ingenious design of these windows also helped to placate the ghosts, who otherwise might have been afraid of the beaming light.

III.

It has been said that Hardy had two loves, neither of whom was his wife: his mother Jemimah and Tess, his most famous fictional creation. I discern a third love in Hardy’s personal pantheon: Dorset and its environs and the heart of which is Dorchester. Hardy loved this region so much that he created a fictional country in its image.

He called the country Wessex, after the medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom that existed in this land prior to the unification of England in the 10th century. Every fictional name in the world of Wessex closely corresponds to a city, a village, or a street in the region of Dorset. In the world of Wessex, Dorchester is transformed into Casterbridge, Weymouth becomes Budmouth, Chalk Newton is reborn as Maiden Newton, and so on.

It is not merely that the landscapes and towns of Dorset are characters: in Hardy's writings, these places occupy the position of the author. Hardy's imagination is inseparable from the land where he was born. More than a character, the Dorset landscape is the soil on which every other character is conceived and through which they fulfill their destiny. The author speaks through the trees and the rolling green valleys of Dorset, its farms and its ruins. As Hardy wrote in appointing himself the medium through which his characters would be born and the world thereby transformed: "there is something the world ought to be shown, and I am the one to show it to them." Dorset was intrinsic to Hardy's literary vocation.

Hardy invested tremendous energy in building Max Gate from scratch, drawing on his training as an architect. Soon after moving in, he asked himself in his notebook "whether building this house at Max Gate was a wise expenditure of energy is one doubt, which, if resolved in the negative is depressing enough." Whatever Hardy's initial doubts, he remained there for forty-three years, until the end of his life. However imperfect, the house was an expression of his soul.

The process through which rooms and extensions were added is visibly haphazard. Although the stately three-storied house looms large from a distance, from inside the rooms impart a claustrophobic feeling. The staircases are unusually steep, and the alignment of the rooms is uneven, as if the architect never expected that he might need to expand beyond the original plan.

Like the haphazard design of his house, the story of Hardy's life—in particular his two marriages—suggests that the subject was caught off guard by just how badly ill-suited he was for domestic bliss. Hardy married both of his wives for love, in fits of infatuation. The first marriage, to Emma, was against his mother Jemimah's clear instructions to all of her children that they should never marry but instead live with each other in pairs. Jemimah had witnessed her own ambitions for her life blocked by marriage and pregnancy. Although she loved her children, she did the same fate for them. Thomas was the only one among her four children to disobey her instructions. When he married Emma in 1874, Jemimah refused to attend the wedding.

In the case of both marriages, the love faded soon after it was consecrated. Hardy was a past master in taking the women in his life for granted. He began an affair with Florence, the woman who would become his second wife, while his first wife Emma was still living in the attic as his wife, increasingly ill and close to death. Once, when a painter visited to paint a portrait of Hardy, Hardy asked if he could also paint Florence, who was living with him as his secretary. Hardy didn't bother asking for a portrait of his wife Emma, who had cloistered herself in the attic. He went on trips with Florence as his companion while Emma lagged behind, unable to catch up. Hardy often forgot how to love those he knew well. He only remembered what love meant once his beloveds were dead.

In spite of his extraordinary ability to give fictional life to bold and courageous women and his personal support for women's emancipation, Hardy was unprepared to see the women in his life

as his intellectual equals. He did little to nourish the writing talents and ambitions of either of his wives. The women he gave birth to with his imagination—Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Bathsheba Everdene, and Fanny Day—never lost their charm for him. To give Hardy his due, these fictional women have also liberated many real women and men from the strictures of Victorian morality. Hardy fought for their dignity and insisted on the purity of their fictional hearts. He shielded his heroines from the insults that were hurled their way, and endured harsh reviews for their sake. He was less tolerant towards his wives, from whom the sheen faded for him soon after he came to know them as flesh-and-blood humans.

IV.

Hardy's gift for creating intrepid and independent women is one of his most unique talents and the basis of his contribution to world literature. Where he lacked the vision that would have made him an even more revolutionary writer is evident in his portrayal of men. The men in Hardy's fictional worlds are too conventional and too self-centred for their own good, even when their learning and their training inclines them to a better relationship with the world. In this sense, they are ciphers for Hardy himself, crafted into being by an author who was acutely aware of his limitations as a human being, a husband, and a lover, yet unable to surmount them.

Take the character of Angel Clare, the husband of the eponymous heroine of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Angel's name speaks for itself. For the women who become infatuated by him, Angel Clare has the lucidity and purity of an angel. As the son of a parson, he comes from a somewhat higher class than Tess, who meets him while he is serving an apprenticeship at a dairy farm. In Roman Polanski's 1979 film version of the novel, we see Angel reading Marx's *Capital*, yet otherwise his intellectual pretensions are left vague, a sign that perhaps he is not as enlightened as he considers himself to be.

Seeing Angel as a representative of the higher spiritual and intellectual world that she yearns to belong to, Tess falls in love with him. Despite her sense of unworthiness, she eventually assents to his proposal of marriage. Tess does so with trepidation, aware that her past involvement with a wealthy aristocrat who raped her and subsequent impregnated her may compromise her in the eyes of many men, including her fiancée. Yet her mother has counselled secrecy and Tess manages to hold her tongue until after her wedding.

If *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is a love story, we must ask: what exactly attracts Angel to Tess? What is the nature of the love that draws them to each other? We discover the shallowness and hypocrisy of Angel's love for his wife on their wedding night. Angel confesses to Tess that he had a sexual relationship with an older woman shortly before meeting her. He asks his wife's forgiveness, and clearly expects to receive it. Angel's confession strengthens Tess's resolve to confess her own past sexual encounter to her husband. He listens in shock as Tess describes an affair that in terms of its superficiality parallels the affair her husband had just confessed to her and received her forgiveness for. Only the gender roles are inverted. Another major difference is that Tess's sexual liaison resulted in the birth of a child.

In her naive faith in Angel's intellectual and moral integrity, and her innate belief that ethical standards universally apply across genders, Tess innocently expects to receive the same forgiveness from her husband that she has just given him. Yet, even for the

likes of a seemingly enlightened man like Angel, the sexual double standard runs much deeper than she—and perhaps he—had suspected. Angel cannot stand the thought of residing in the same house with his wife now that he knows she was intimate with another man who is still alive and who is, in his terminology, her “husband in Nature.” He tells her that the Tess who had been sexually involved with someone else before he met her is not the woman he loved. Tess in the flesh is another woman than the one who excited his imagination with visions of sexually alluring female purity. He cannot love this new woman at all.

Angel departs for Brazil to become a colonizer of a new territory, but not before inviting one of Tess’s former co-workers at the dairy farm to join him on the journey. When parting from his wife, he coolly tells her that she “may write” if she is in need without giving her a clear way of doing so. By going to Brazil without leaving a forwarding address, Angel pretty much insures that, his empty promises notwithstanding, he will be out of reach when she needs his help.

The destitution that ensues for Tess and her family could have been easily predicted by anyone who understood the socio-economic prospects for abandoned women at the time. Angel does not think to help her, even though he could easily have guessed that she would stand in need of his assistance. Years later, he returns to England after Tess has escaped homelessness for herself, her mother, and her siblings by marrying her rapist. The only thing left for Tess to do if she wants to be united with her true beloved

Angel is to commit a heinous crime that will result in her eventual execution.

Hardy is a discerning writer. He is fully capable of critiquing the sexual double standard harboured by the most progressive of men. Yet he does not seem capable of creating male characters who have the capacity to surmount their own prejudice. Throughout the novel, Angel’s hypocrisy is acknowledged, yet also forgiven. He is allowed to maintain his own illusions regarding his own purity, which seems to him untainted by his sexual dalliances, while meanwhile Tess is condemned forever because a man sexually violated her.

The plot reveals this sexual double standard in action, yet Hardy could have gone further with his critique. He could have allowed Tess to get angry at Angel, and to recognize him as the hypocrite that he is. He could have given Tess more ambivalent feelings towards her beloved than steadfast uncritical love, given Angel’s abusive treatment, and the insult implied by his application to her of the sexual double standard. Hardy could in short have given Tess the courage to reject him.

Tess does reproach Angel in a letter, but her scorn is transitory, more a transitory fit of emotion than the principled rejection that he deserves. When Angel finally reappears in her life after a delay of many years, all her anger evaporates and her love bursts forth, as strong and self-destructive as ever, and ultimately as denigrating to women. It is in this condition, under the sway of a powerful love for her beloved, that Tess murders her rapist while they are eating breakfast. She spends the next few days on a wild and futile attempt to escape England with Angel guiding her. They are caught by the police, as Tess lies symbolically stretched over the sarcen stones of Stonehenge. (Don’t forget that Hardy wrote *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* from Max Gate, overlooking his own sarcen stone.) Tess is soon thereafter hanged by the state, her life and happiness having been sacrificed to the sexual double standards of prejudiced and hypocritical men, including the rapist who took her virginity and then married her, her beloved Angel who refused to accept her for the woman that she was, and the patriarchal order that ultimately brings about her death.

As a literary creator, Hardy was a genius who saw further than most of his fellow men in his fictional creations. Yet the lives of the women he loved—including Emma’s—show that he was also a hypocrite, not unlike Angel, who judged the women in his life according to a sexual double standard that he could intellectually critique yet never entirely disown. While many details of Hardy’s love life are unknown to us, we do know that he allowed himself a great deal more infidelity than his wives engaged in. He would have done better to love these women as they were, with all their flaws and imperfections.

Hardy’s home is as much a tribute to the place of his birth as it is a product of it. Were the ghosts of Max Gate able to speak from their graves, they would tell a tale of sorrow and disappointment at how easily love can change into something else. Yet it would be a tale laced with wonder, illuminated by the ancient relics of Dorset and of Max Gate. The ghosts of Max Gate would speak like Hardy’s fictions, giving life to suppressed longings across the centuries, mixing hope with despair. They might explain to us how it was possible for a man who understood and loved so much to hold so cheaply those at the centre of his life. In so doing, they might have taught us something about ourselves. □



Hardy’s Poetry Study at Max Gate. Photograph by author (2024).

The Great Indoors

Exciting Escapes in the Comfort of Home

Eric N. Patel



Illustration: Suleyman / Adobe Stock

In an era dominated by the ceaseless pursuit of nature, fresh air, and the great outdoors—a time where society lauds the supposed curative powers of sunshine and wilderness—a bold and revolutionary movement has courageously risen to challenge these entrenched beliefs. Meet the vanguard of “The Great Indoors”—a group of visionary indoor enthusiasts who have, with remarkable insight, come to realize that true enlightenment and well-being are not to be found in the unpredictable and often harsh embrace of the natural world.

Instead, they assert that real tranquility and health are achieved in the controlled, serene environment of one’s own home. This cadre of pioneers champions the stability and predictability of indoor living, eschewing the wide, uncontrolled expanse of the outdoors for spaces where temperature, lighting, and elements are meticulously regulated to foster comfort and safety. They argue, persuasively, that the age-old adage “nature is good for the soul” overlooks the profound benefits of a life spent within the secure confines of meticulously curated indoor environments, where one can experience the apex of human comfort and technological convenience.

We owe a profound debt of gratitude to these unsung heroes, the stalwart pioneers of “The Great Indoors,” who have introduced and steadfastly advocated for the concept of complete indoor living. This lifestyle choice, as revolutionary as it is eminently logical, represents a significant departure from traditional values that mistakenly equate open-air activities with greater health and happiness. Why, indeed, should one willingly expose oneself to the capricious whims of nature—its erratic changes in weather, its often inhospitable conditions—when the technology exists to maintain a perfect, unwavering indoor climate of 72 degrees Fahrenheit all year round?

For the devotee of indoor living, the vagaries of weather—be it the relentless pelting of rain, the smothering blanket of snow, or the aggressive blaze of the sun—are mere trifles. Windows transform in their view, no longer seen as gateways to a world of natural beauty and wonder, but rather as essential barriers, robust shields that protect and insulate from the chaos and unpredictability of the external environment. These indoor aficionados understand that true comfort and security are found not in the ever-changing and often hostile outdoor elements, but within the controlled, predictable sanctuaries of their own homes.



Illustration: Suleyman / Adobe Stock

Moreover, it is imperative to question the widespread societal fixation on the notion of “getting some fresh air.” This phrase, so often uttered as a panacea for all ills, begs scrutiny when placed alongside the capabilities of modern indoor air management systems. What, indeed, does this so-called fresh air offer that the sophisticated, meticulously filtered air provided by cutting-edge HVAC technology cannot surpass? Contemporary advancements in air conditioning and purification systems have not only matched but far exceeded the simple concept of fresh air.

These systems deliver an atmosphere that is not merely fresh but is also purified—meticulously cleared of common airborne irritants such as pollen, dust, and pollutants. They remove the unpredictable and often undesirable natural scents carried by the breeze—whether it be the overpowering smell of blossoming flowers or the less pleasant odors of urban decay. Instead, they offer a consistent, controlled air quality that can be adjusted to suit individual preferences and health requirements, ensuring that the indoor environment remains a bastion of stability and cleanliness, far removed from the capriciousness of the natural world’s atmosphere.

Let us delve deeper into the domain of interpersonal interactions, a realm traditionally dominated by the belief that physical, face-to-face encounters are crucial for establishing genuine human connections. This perspective, however, is increasingly challenged by the advocates of The Great Indoors, who contend that such conventional approaches are outdated in the context of today’s digital landscape. These modern thinkers argue that the essence of meaningful relationships can be fully captured and sustained through digital means, leveraging the vast array of technologies at our disposal.

In this digital age, online platforms and social networking are not just supplementary tools but essential lifelines that facilitate connections without the necessity of physical presence. The convenience and efficiency offered by these technologies render

traditional in-person meetings less appealing and, in many respects, obsolete. Why endure the hassle of travel, the constraints of scheduling, and the unpredictable variables of in-person interaction when a simple video call offers immediate and effective communication? These virtual interactions can be both rich and nuanced, offering visual and auditory engagement that closely mimics physical presence.

Moreover, the proponents of The Great Indoors emphasize the adaptability and accessibility of digital communication, which can bridge vast geographical divides and connect individuals across different time zones with ease. The capacity to maintain relationships, collaborate on projects, and even form new connections online challenges the very need for physical travel to meet face-to-face. In this view, the insistence on physical presence is seen as a quaint artifact of earlier times—a relic that belongs more to the history books than to our fast-paced, globally connected present. This shift not only redefines interpersonal interactions but also aligns perfectly with a more sustainable, efficient, and adaptable lifestyle, heralded by the champions of indoor living.

The Great Indoors not only offers refuge from the vagaries of nature but actively promotes a lifestyle free from the rigorous and often perilous exertions extolled by outdoor enthusiasts. Consider the common outdoor pursuits such as jogging in the park, hiking up rugged mountains, or swimming in the unpredictable currents of oceans—each activity carries inherent risks and discomforts, from inclement weather to unexpected wildlife encounters.

In stark contrast, the indoor life presents a collection of far superior and safer exercise options. Treadmills, for instance, allow one to run without the risk of uneven terrain or adverse weather. Yoga mats provide a clean, controlled environment for stretching and strengthening exercises, free from the disturbances of insects or the prying eyes of passersby.

These indoor exercise options offer several significant advantages. They are calibrated and controlled, ensuring that each

workout is performed in an environment optimized for personal comfort and safety. More importantly, they are entirely interruptible. Should one feel the sudden urge for a snack or desire a quick nap, pausing a video is but a click away. This flexibility is invaluable, allowing individuals to integrate physical activity into their daily routine without the commitment and unpredictability associated with outdoor activities.

Furthermore, the controlled environment of indoor exercising eliminates many barriers to regular physical activity. There is no need to worry about the time of day, weather conditions, or travel to distant locations. Everything one needs for a comprehensive workout is readily available in the safety and comfort of one's own home. This convenience is not just about physical comfort but also about promoting a consistent, sustainable approach to fitness, tailored perfectly to the lifestyle of the modern indoor dweller.

And what of culture and entertainment in the age of The Great Indoors? The days of needing to venture outside to soak in cultural experiences and entertainment are a relic of the past. Today's modern indoor dweller has access to an unprecedented wealth of resources right at their fingertips, thanks to the digital revolution that has transformed how we access and consume culture.

Streaming services, an integral part of any indoor enthusiast's arsenal, provide an almost limitless array of options, encompassing everything from the latest blockbuster films and binge-worthy television series to live concert streams and exclusive behind-the-scenes content. These platforms cater to a vast spectrum of tastes and preferences, ensuring that whether one is a devotee of high drama, a fan of slapstick comedy, or an aficionado of documentaries, there is always something new to discover.

Moreover, the cultural offerings extend beyond mere passive viewing. Virtual tours of world-renowned museums and galleries allow individuals to stroll through the corridors of the Louvre, explore the relics of the British Museum, or marvel at the modern masterpieces in the Museum of Modern Art, all without leaving their living room. These experiences are often enriched with interactive elements such as expert commentary, high-resolution images of artwork, and multimedia presentations that enhance understanding and appreciation.

Furthermore, the rise of online platforms has democratized access to cultural events that were once geographically and economically inaccessible to many. Opera houses, symphonies, and theaters now stream performances live, allowing anyone with an internet connection to experience high culture without the need to dress up or even step outside.

So, in this era of The Great Indoors, one might ask, what is left outside that cannot be found inside? With such a rich tapestry of cultural and entertainment options available online, the indoor environment has not only matched the outside world's offerings but in many ways, surpassed them, providing more convenient, accessible, and versatile ways to enjoy the best of what human creativity has to offer.

Indeed, as we forge ahead, let us sing praises to the pioneers of The Great Indoors. They have not only embraced but championed a lifestyle that is sustainable, safe, and sanitary. They have recognized that everything one could ever need or desire can be found within the four comforting walls of one's own dwelling. To them, the great outdoors will always stand second to the superior, sublime Great Indoors. □

Houseplant Love

Lorna Wood

Think of me as a houseplant.
Not the prettiest, most glamorous orchid
you could have brought home,
but perhaps I have some distinctive markings
or an oddly shaped leaf.

You don't have to think of me all the time.
I like to be alone and grow my own way.
But in the back of your mind, you know
I'm here, lending your living room
a little grace—a touch of exotic color
or foliage—and providing, literally,
a breath of fresh air.

You'll find me not too difficult to care for,
but rewarding when you remember.
If I died, you would be sorry.
Something in your life would be missing,
and it would seem like too much trouble
to start over with another plant,
even a prettier one.
It just wouldn't be the same.

The thought of it reminds you
to water me, turn me tenderly to the light,
talk to me aimlessly of this and that:
What do you think of those people
we had over yesterday?
'Meh'? Me too."

How astonished you will be
the next morning to see me
covered in blossoms.

Charley Horse

Linda E. Duchin



Illustration: leo_d / Adobe Stock

In the Congo, somewhere outside of Rutshura, the truck's back wheels entered a pot-hole and didn't come back out. The tires banged their heads against the huge wall of sand, and dug themselves a little burrow to settle into for the night. I was with Jean Pierre, a young Congolese driver. He was thin, weighing hardly more than the crowbar he tried to wedge beneath a back tire. I offered to get some wood to cram under the tire. I told him I could handle the crowbar and push.

"That way you can ease the gas pedal as I push," I said, and he jumped back into the driver's seat.

"Ready?" he called.

"Yes, all set."

I made just enough progress to wedge

one end of the crow-bar in the pit forever, while the other end of it went into my thigh when the truck rolled back. My deep alien scream killed the engine and my circulation simultaneously. Jean Pierre jumped out of the truck, pushed it slightly forward, and the iron wedge fell out of my leg in the midst of a red geyser squirting straight up.

I fell backward. He fainted. I dragged myself over to my first aid kit thinking how good it was that I would finally get to use some of the bandages I had lugged for years. Foolishness and irrational focus seem to be my forte in times of crisis. I think in some perverse way it may be adaptive, as I didn't panic at all.

But the blood kept coming. I began to think of where I had last seen people. On

which side of the forest had they been? Were they near? I wrapped all the rest of my bandages around my wound, and staggered off for help. I knew Jean Pierre would never have left his precious vehicle alone, so it was do or die. Perhaps literally.

With loss of blood and no sense of time, I must have been looped by the time I found people. I irrationally thought they were speaking in English to me, as they picked me up by the armpits and repeatedly nodded,

"Charley horse, charley horse."

Well, it was more like "chahlee hawss," but in either case I knew they were severely misdiagnosing my ailment.

They carried me in and out of consciousness to a little wooden shack in a village courtyard. The outer walls were decorated with colorful feathers, carved charms, and other stuff I could no longer focus on. I assumed they were magical potions, because I was hoping this was the medicine-woman's place where they treated charley horses and worse.

Once inside with a drink of water and a table to lie on, I realized that they couldn't have been speaking English, but probably Kinrwandan or something else I didn't know. I soon focused on a tall, dark man with a feathered hat, long strings of beads over a Kente-cloth shirt, and Western jeans. He was clearly the 'main man,' so I addressed my broken Swahili to him, trying to explain the accident and my fear of infection, despite the fact that I couldn't think of any word for anything related to 'infection.'

He put a tourniquet on my leg, and busied himself with something in a cupboard behind me while I fumbled with words. He then emerged in front of me with a syringe and a completion for my sentence.

"Infection," he said in English, "Yes, it's a possibility. Are your immunizations up to date, especially for tetanus?"

I was again near fainting and couldn't answer, but I heard him say, "Well I'll just

give you a tetanus shot along with this antibiotic and stitch you back up. Alright?"

He had a mid-western accent, like he was from Iowa or Minnesota!

"Jesus," I said, feeling more faint and foolish by the second, "I thought you were--"

"I know," he said, jabbing my arm with the needle, "it's okay. I'm in training, so to speak." And he explained his story of physician gone anthropologist as he numbed my leg, cleaned, stitched, and bandaged it as if we were at the Mayo Clinic.

Charlie, (hence "Charlie's House") had gone through medical school in the years I'd been dropping out of college, only to find that he was much more interested in people's concepts of medicine than in the actual Western practice of the art. He was particularly fascinated by cross-cultural comparisons of disease definitions and treatments of same, and was lucky enough (his words) to have run into someone who told him about the field of medical anthropology.

"And here I am," he said, "and there you are."

I was bandaged, loaded with pain pills, and being offered food.

"I'd recommend resting for a week at least," he said, "but not here, as it's a poor village without much food to spare. Do you want to find your driver or should I give you a ride into Goma and help him with his truck later?"

I was still on slow-forward culture shock. I was speaking with an American who looked like a witch doctor in old movies. He was actually studying to be one. All I could mumble was

"Yeah...."

"Okay, eat up, and I'll get my jeep." He smiled a bright friendly smile of compassion in spite of the fact that he was trying to hurry me out of there. He left the hut and started speaking to the others in a language I didn't catch. When he returned I had dozed off, and I startled when he lifted me up to carry me to the jeep.

"I'm not trying to be rude, honestly," he explained "but you're gonna be fine. I know these people like family and they'd try to care for and feed you, and I know they can't afford to share the meager supplies they've got this season."

"I understand," I said weakly, and I smiled and waved a thank you. They all waved back and repeated my "thank you, thank you."

We drove off to the series of pot-holes, craters, gulleys, and gravels called the road.

I spent endless days in bed with my leg up and antibiotics down the hatch. I tried to 'ring up' the people I'd booked a river trip with, to see if I could reschedule and do it the following week. Foolishly, I thought I could get it straightened out before they took my deposit and went off for the rainforest and okapi watching in Uganda.

Charlie checked in on me each day. What a guy! He told me that Jean Pierre had headed home once the men of the village got his truck back onto the road. It was a happy ending for him since he'd been paid in advance.

On day twelve, my witch-doctor approved my healing leg infection-free and ready for travel. I thanked him profusely and tried to offer some kind of repayment.

"You don't need to, my university is paying for all my supplies."

He smiled a warm sarcastic grin at me and said that stitching me up was all part of his job.

"I provide medical care to all, but am here to study alternative definitions and treatments of mental illness," he said, smirking, "and I think any young American woman traveling here alone fits the bill, don't you?"

"Well, possibly," I replied defiantly, "but I know that what I need isn't a shrink, but one more jungle adventure. And my offer is not for you anyway! It's for the people in your village."

"Alright then, I'll take your money, or were you buying them a large herd of goats?"

He was quick and clever, but I saw a split second of embarrassment or maybe humility. He probably needed the practice.

"Your river trip will be mostly observation from the boat, so try to stay seated with your leg elevated if at all possible."

"Yes, doctor."

"Okay," he smiled parentally now, "I've cut back your pain pills, so just take the rest of the antibiotics along with your malaria pills every day. You do take those don't you?"

"Yes dad," I baited him, "and thanks again, really."

Four days after that, I got on the river boat for my jungle adventure. Three weeks later I flew back to the States. Home hadn't changed, but of course I had. I went to see a friend and her new baby, and who did I see in the hall of the maternity ward, but Dr.-in-white-lab-coat Charlie!

"Charlie Horse!" I said out loud, in my surprise.

He turned around at hearing *one* of his names, and stared at me inquisitively. I finally saw his flash of recognition brighten his whole face.

"You've got a charley horse so you come to a hospital? See, I told you you were nuts."

He smiled that great warm dance of grinning that I remembered from Rutshura. He finished talking to another lab coat, and we went to 'take some tea.'

What can I say? Was it love at first faint? Was it a match made in African heaven? Or was it just a coincidence too strong to ignore? Was he attracted to the wild and insane parts of me? And I, to the calm, knows-what-he's-into parts of him? I had come back to America with a piece of Africa in my soul. Now, it seemed that I had found a part of that experience here at home, moving into my heart.

We went out several times to reminisce and exchange African highlights. And then we talked about other experiences, and our thoughts on the future. He planned to continue his cross-cultural work and travel everywhere and learn everything. The joy of it just sparkled in his eyes when he spoke.

There was a radiant light and electricity flowing from him at 186,000 miles per second. It charged the air with such force that the hairs on the back of my neck were pulled up like little filings on a magnet. It was a jolt of lightning to be around him. A dynamic festival of fireworks taking no energy of my own, but charging up from the atmosphere he created around him. It gave a brand-new meaning to the old term of being grounded. He was both light and ground. And I was jumping with voltage and calmly grounded in reality, all at the same time.

He laughed for a very long time when I told him I was a writer.

"I can't imagine you holding still long enough to write."

I laughed too. It was contagious. I told him that I was currently working for a food magazine, and planned to continue to travel and do more in the series on foreign recipes, ingredients, and flavors.

"I have a great sense of smell, and well, therefore, of taste, too," I said, slightly defensively, "I'm good at writing prose descriptions of new and exotic flavors and dishes."

"So, let's go make something exotic," he said as we walked towards his apartment.

And we did. □

The Talented Ms. Highsmith

Ripley as a Window to a Tortured Soul

Eleanor Jiménez



On April 4, Netflix unveiled its latest dramatic offering, “*Ripley*,” a series that has quickly captivated both critics and audiences with its deep psychological intrigue and stunning visual storytelling. Based on Patricia Highsmith’s celebrated

novel, “*The Talented Mr. Ripley*,” this new adaptation breathes fresh life into the complex tale of identity, deceit, and morality. The series stars Andrew Scott, whose portrayal of the enigmatic Tom Ripley has been met with widespread acclaim, highlighting his ability to navigate the murky

waters of Ripley’s manipulative and multifaceted persona. As “*Ripley*” garners attention for its bold narrative choices and its noir-inspired aesthetics, it stands as a testament to Highsmith’s enduring legacy and the timeless appeal of her most infamous character.

Patricia Highsmith, an unparalleled master of psychological depth and suspenseful storytelling, meticulously crafted characters and plots that deeply resonated with the complexities and often tumultuous experiences of her own life. Her skill in weaving intricate narratives that delve into the darker corners of human nature is exemplified in one of her most celebrated works, “*The Talented Mr. Ripley*.” This novel, a standout in her extensive oeuvre, deftly encapsulates numerous elements of her personal struggles and her multifaceted professional identity. These themes of identity, deception, and the psychological underpinnings of human behavior are not only central to the novel but are also compellingly reflected in the recent Netflix adaptation, “*Ripley*.” The series revisits and expands upon the foundational motifs of Highsmith’s work, casting a modern light on the enduring relevance of her literary explorations and showcasing how her own life’s narrative is deeply intertwined with that of her fictional creations.

Patricia Highsmith’s life was characterized by a profound series of contrasts and contradictions that significantly shaped her personal and literary landscapes. Born in 1921 in Fort Worth, Texas, Highsmith’s early years were marred by a complex and often contentious relationship with her mother, Mary Coates, who was known to be both verbally abusive and emotionally distant. This fraught maternal relationship,



Photo: Netflix

Andrew Scott gives a mesmerizing performance as murderous con-man Tom Ripley in Steven Zaillian's new adaptation of Highsmith's classic novel.

coupled with a childhood feeling of displacement and rootlessness, profoundly impacted Highsmith's sense of self and belonging. Her parents divorced ten days before her birth, and she spent much of her early life moving between New York and Texas, never fully at ease in either location.

These early experiences of emotional turmoil and geographic instability are vividly mirrored in Highsmith's most famous literary creation, Tom Ripley. Ripley, much like Highsmith, is a character perpetually on the social periphery, uneasy and discontented in his own skin. His life, marked by a continuous struggle with identity, sees him adopting the personas and desires of those around him, a method of coping that allows him to manipulate his way through a world in which he feels fundamentally alienated. This theme of identity—its fluidity and the ease with which it can be fabricated or stolen—be-

comes a central motif in "The Talented Mr. Ripley."

Highsmith imbued Ripley with her own sharp intellect and capacity for cold calculation, qualities that allowed both the author and her character to navigate and manipulate their environments with a chilling effectiveness. Ripley's actions, driven by a deep-seated yearning for belonging and an inherent discomfort with his authentic self, reflect Highsmith's own lifelong grappling with issues of identity and acceptance. Through Ripley, Highsmith explores the darker impulses driven by societal rejection and the human cost of a chameleon-like existence, where adaptation involves not just survival but a profound moral compromise.

Highsmith's own identity was something of a chameleon's, much like Ripley's. Openly bisexual at a time when it was both dangerous and taboo, she navigated various social circles and often felt the need

to mask her true self from the world. Ripley, similarly, is adept at disguising his intentions and emotions, molding himself to fit the expectations and desires of those around him. This theme of identity—both hidden and reconstructed—is central to both the novel and its adaptations.

The psychological depth Highsmith infused in Ripley's character is a reflection of her own introspective and often solitary nature. Highsmith was known for her complex personality, her solitude, and her sometimes controversial opinions, which often isolated her from others. In Ripley, she created a character who also operates in isolation, albeit in a different manner—using his solitude as a weapon and a shield, allowing him to manipulate others without revealing his true nature.

The setting of the novel, primarily the sunny and scenic locales of Italy, contrasts sharply with the dark deeds that unfold—another reflection of Highsmith's

life, which was outwardly successful but internally tumultuous. “Ripley,” the TV series, emphasizes this contrast even more starkly by presenting the narrative in stark black and white, drawing a line through the dualities of Highsmith’s and Ripley’s characters.

The Netflix series also explores themes of forgery and falsity, not just in terms of Ripley’s actions but also in the façade he presents. This mirrors Highsmith’s own challenges with her identity and the masks she wore. The choice of black-and-white cinematography in the series amplifies the theme of duality—a world of visible contrasts, much like the internal conflicts Highsmith experienced and poured into her writing.

The exploration of Tom Ripley’s sexuality in the Netflix series “Ripley” introduces a significant and complex new dimension to the narrative, creating a deep and resonant connection to Patricia Highsmith’s own experiences. The series delves into the intricacies of Ripley’s sexual identity more explicitly than the novels, portraying his relationships and attractions with a nuanced ambiguity that reflects contemporary understandings of fluid and complex sexual identities. This modern portrayal is a bold departure from the more subdued hints found in Highsmith’s original texts, mirroring today’s broader societal acceptance and dialogue around LGBTQ+ issues.

Highsmith, who navigated her own bisexual identity in a time of far greater social constraints and personal risk, often infused her characters with similar complexities, though typically shrouded in subtlety. Her personal diaries and letters reveal a woman who struggled with her sexual identity, often feeling alienated by the societal norms of her day. In “Ripley,” this aspect of personal identity conflict is brought to the forefront, providing a richer, more layered understanding of Ripley’s actions and motivations.

By emphasizing Ripley’s fluid sexuality, the series not only pays homage to Highsmith’s own life challenges but also challenges the audience to reconsider the character’s manipulations and disguises as part of a broader quest for self-definition in a restrictive world. This focus adds a profound layer of psychological realism to the narrative, suggesting that Ripley’s chameleonic social maneuverings are in-



Photo: Netflix

tertwined with an internal battle over his identity and desires. The series portrays Ripley’s sexual ambiguity as both a facet of his enigmatic character and a field of personal conflict, offering a contemporary take on Highsmith’s themes that resonates with current conversations about identity and acceptance.

In conclusion, the life of Patricia Highsmith and her creation, Tom Ripley, are intricately woven together through shared themes of identity, isolation, and

the human psyche. The series “Ripley” not only adapts Highsmith’s work but also serves as a lens through which to view her life. It is a testament to the enduring power of Highsmith’s literary skill that her characters continue to resonate so strongly, reflecting both the darkness and complexity of the human condition. Through “The Talented Mr. Ripley” and “Ripley,” we see not just the reflection of a character but the silhouette of the talented Ms. Highsmith herself. □

Opening Night

Heimir Steinarrsson



Illustration: Jesusanz / Adobe Stock

I really never miss deadlines. In fact, I pride myself on my punctuality and reliability. But today I screwed up. Big time. I was supposed to deliver this article about a local art exhibition, where one of the hottest new painters was showing his latest work. It was supposed to be the “Event of the Year” in the art world.

Everybody was at the opening – everybody that mattered, anyway. I had received an invitation as a representative of the magazine I worked for. Nobody would ever invite me to an event like this if I weren’t writing about it.

I arrived late – I usually do so I don’t have to stand alone in a corner, or worse, talk to people I don’t like. Richard, the photographer from our magazine, was already there, taking pictures of the guests with glasses of champagne in their hands

and fake smiles on their faces. It was my job to get these guests’ names for the captioning of the photos, but I didn’t bother with it. I knew the names of most of these local celebrities, and the ones I didn’t know had no business in the magazine anyway.

“Glad you could make it,” Richard said when he saw me.

“Quite a turnout,” I replied and checked out the gathering of enthusiastic art lovers.

“The usual crowd,” Richard said matter-of-factly.

“You’ve got any good pictures yet?”

“I’ve got enough. Took some photos of the artwork before the place got too jammed. Interesting stuff, actually.”

I tried to catch a glimpse of the paintings on the wall, but the place was just too packed. What is the sense of going to an art exhibition when the only thing you see

is a bunch of people standing around and behaving as if they were at a cocktail-party?

“Here, take a look at this,” Richard said and handed me a printed catalogue.

“Did they give you two of these?” I asked and started leafing through the glossy booklet.

“They gave me one. I pilfered the other.”

I flicked through the catalogue and noticed with satisfaction that the gallerist’s foreword was extensive and that the artist’s bio was comprehensive. This would make my work a lot easier, since most of my articles about art shows are practically just a rewriting of the information I find in these catalogues and on the artist’s webpage.

The artwork was actually interesting. It consisted of over-painted photographs, where the color had been used to highlight the features of the models, making them

come to life in a way that ordinary pictures couldn't. The photos in the catalogue were mainly portraits of young people in sensual, almost erotic positions, without ever being rude or vulgar. The artist had managed to tread the thin line between sensuality and pornography, and the outcome was truly astonishing.

"The guy sure has talent," I said while continuing to browse through the catalogue, admiring the pictures of young men and women in various exciting postures.

"Wait, isn't that Anna?" I said and pointed at the picture of a beautiful young woman posing in a captivating manner.

"Yeah, that's Anna. I meant to tell you. There are several pictures of her on display." Richard seemed slightly uncomfortable, but he tried to mask his unease with a nonchalant attitude and a jovial smile.

"But when were these pictures taken?" I asked in disbelief. Some of them must have been at least a year old, judging by Anna's hairstyle and appearance.

"She's here, by the way."

"Who, Anna?" I looked frantically around.

"Over there, with the artist."

Sure enough, there she was. Beautiful as ever, smiling, laughing, the focus of everyone's attention. The artist had his arm around her back, as if to make it absolutely clear that she was with him.

It all made sense now. The late hours "working" and "meeting friends". More and more often, until she at last said that she wanted to split and "move on with her life". Move on!? She sure had moved on with her life. And she was moving up in the world. She was now the center of attention like she always had wanted.

Richard looked at me, and I could see that he made an effort to keep a blank face. In a situation like this, you don't want to show signs of gloating – or worse – pity.

For a moment, I wasn't sure what to do next. Go up to Anna and confront her in front of all these people? Tell her that I hated her lying guts and wish her all the worst for the future? Or just leave and write a devastating review about the bastard who stole my woman from me?

I was still trying to figure out my next step when a waitress came in carrying a tray of glasses filled with champagne. I usually

never drink alcohol at these events or eat those little canapés they serve. I'm there to work, and it wouldn't be professional to indulge in the free food or drinks.

But this time, I decided to have some champagne, and when the girl walked past me with the tray, I took two glasses. I held on to both of them without making the pretense of offering one to Richard. He wouldn't have taken it anyway. He, too, never drinks at these events.

While I gulped down the champagne I looked at Richard's face for any signs of disapproval, but he didn't seem to mind my behavior. I finished the first drink and put the empty glass on a pedestal table that held some kind of flower decoration.

"Artwork with empty wine glass," I said, as if giving the piece a title.

Richard said nothing, just looked at the waitress taking the empty glass off the table and putting it on her tray. I drank the other glass and waited for Richard to say something. At this point I was actually somewhat annoyed at him for keeping a straight face. I wanted him at least to ask me if I thought this was a good idea, or something of the sort. I finished the champagne and waited for the girl with the tray to walk past me, so that I could exchange the empty glass for a full one.

"Where are the snacks?" I asked Richard, but he didn't reply. I looked around and spotted a small table where all kinds of finger-food was laid out. I walked over to the table and put some cucumbers with smoked salmon and bacon-wrapped shrimp on a paper napkin. Then I stuffed some mozzarella sticks in my mouth and walked back to where Richard was standing, grabbing a full glass of champagne on the way. Richard still showed no sign of dislike, and I was even beginning to think that he approved of my breach of etiquette as a means of revenge.

"Great finger-food," I said, maybe a little too loud, for I noticed that some of the gallery guests were looking over at us.

"I'm leaving," Richard said suddenly, and made himself ready to go by stuffing his camera and his pilfered catalogues into his bag. Then he walked out with a short "See you," without asking me if I wanted to join him.

I wouldn't have come with him anyway. By now, I was having too much fun. I

found the waitress and took another glass of champagne from her tray. And then another.

That's really all I remember from the evening—at least what I remember clearly. I have some foggy remembrances of me talking to Anna and some pushing and shoving from the artist, whose name I have now totally forgotten. And of something breaking. Something fell from a pedestal table and shattered with a loud crash.

I have no idea how I got home. My head hurts and I reek of vomit. The battery of my phone is dead. I plug it in, and when I turn it on, I see a bunch of missed calls and some messages. My editor has called several times, inquiring about the article that was due this morning. He left some voice mails, the last one saying that I'm fired. "Don't bother showing your drunken face again at his office again."

Then there's a text message from Richard: "Congratulations, you made the headlines!" and a link to some website. I click on the link and am transferred to the online web platform of some local newspaper.

"Commotion at Downtown Art Exhibition" says the headline. Under it is a picture of two muscular guys escorting me – or should I say *throwing me out* of the gallery. In the background, I recognize Anna with an expression of anger and disgust on her face and the artist, whose name turns out to be René (I knew it was something French), wiping his bloody nose with a handkerchief.

Under the picture I notice the photographer's name. It's Richard's! He must have waited outside and been ready with the camera when I made my spectacular exit. He then sent the picture to the newspaper together with the story of the "Commotion".

But why? He, of all people, should know how hurtful it is to be made a fool by a woman like Anna. He knows her and her wicked ways. They were together, he and Anna, before I started seeing her. I mean, it was practically over between them when I started dating her. And Richard never seemed to mind that I was with her. He never said anything about it, and never showed any signs of resentment.

And now this! □

Something's Up

Barbara Ridley



Illustration: Sensvector / Adobe Stock

I'm not one to pry. But it's the middle of the night and there's a light shining from Edith's house next door. I'm up because I need to pee, like I always do. I look out my bathroom window and there it is, burning bright enough to arm a search party. Not from her porch or that fancy motion-detecting gizmo she installed last year. This is coming from one of the upstairs bedrooms, the one she keeps as her guest room.

Right away I know something's up. First of all, no one's supposed to have guests these days. And why would the light be on at 2:30AM? I pad down the hall for a better view from Sam's room. And that's when the light goes off, almost like someone knows I'm watching.

I stand in the dark for a while, spacing out, my hand running over Sam's letterman jacket draped over the headboard, fingering

the large G on the sleeve. I never did understand why he left it behind when he went off to Willamette. I guess he lost interest in football. I should get rid of it after all these years, but I don't. It still carries his smell.

I go back to bed but can't sleep. Maybe I should go check on Edith. We watch out for each other in this neighborhood. But I can hardly call at this hour. I consider going over in my slippers to poke around, but I won't be able to tell much from the outside.

I guess I eventually doze off because next thing I know it's 7:30. Damn! Edith will have already picked up her newspaper, so I can't accidentally-on-purpose go out for mine at the same time. I linger outside in case she appears, but no luck. Her house looks pretty much as it always does, with the living room curtains drawn; she hates

the sun to get on her furniture. I'm tempted to go through her side gate and see if she's in her kitchen but decide better of it. She won't like me snooping.

To tell the truth, we haven't been getting along so well recently. We used to pop over to each other's houses for coffee, hers on Tuesdays, mine on Fridays, but I had to put a stop to that. She talks a bunch of crazy stuff. And refuses to wear a mask. "It's just the flu," she says.

I do miss her. I miss my Pilates class, my hairdresser, the teller at the bank. I haven't touched another human being in ten months. I even miss the grouchy checker at Lucky's. Sam insisted on setting me up with Instacart—just about the only thing he's done for me this whole time. He stayed up in Oregon after college and never did visit much. I hate Instacart. The last two weeks I've had this gal who's clueless. I'm left with wilted lettuce and bananas that rot in a day.

I feel drained all morning and can't be bothered to log on for my Greek mythology class. It's a bit over my head anyways, but I might catch the recording later. For now, I just sit in my front room watching the world go by—what's left of it. I'm about to fix lunch when I spot action next door: a girl walking out and locking the deadbolt behind her.

I jump up, having the presence of mind to grab my watering can from the porch.

"Can I help you?" I say. Which is pretty dumb. She obviously isn't seeking assistance.

She stares at me for a moment, and then says, "I'm fine, thank you. Mrs. Spelman, isn't it?"

I can't figure out how she knows my name.

"It's Jeanie," she says. "I'm cat-sitting for Edith. Like I did last year, remember?"

"Oh, right," I say, though I don't. "Sorry..." She's wearing a baseball cap,

sunglasses, and a black mask, so I have a good excuse. I make a gesture over my own face as if to explain.

She laughs. "Oh, I know."

"Is Edith out of town?"

"She's gone to Florida. To see her sister."

Of course she has. We're told not to travel, but she thinks the rules don't apply to her.

"Have a good day," this Jeanie—or is it Jenny?—says, climbing into a beat-up blue car.

I figure I might as well water my azaleas and I'm just about done, when out the corner of my eye, I catch a movement: Edith's drapes. It's kind of creepy, to be honest. I go back indoors to my seat by the window.

Five minutes later Edith's door opens again, and a young man emerges: tall, thick black hair, handsome I suppose in a hardy sort of way, dressed in jeans, green parka, red bandana around his neck. He also locks the deadbolt—with his own key if you please—and quickly disappears around the corner.

Well! The cheek of her. Entertaining her fancy man on Edith's dime. Wait till Edith hears about this. Good thing I'm here to keep an eye out. I'll watch to see what happens tonight.

Well wouldn't you know it? I can't stay awake. I tell myself I'll take a quick nap and then stand guard in Sam's room, eyes peeled—but I sleep right through like a goddamn baby. First time in months. By the time I'm awake at six, all is quiet next door, same as always. But I'm on top of it now, back at my observation post in the front room.

And nothing happens. Of course, I can't sit here all day, but whenever I check, I see nothing. Nothing in the evening. And no more weird things with lights in the middle of the night either. All's quiet—suspiciously quiet if you ask me.

But the next day, I'm at my post and I see Mrs.... oh hell, what's her name? I can't think of it right now. Names swirl around my brain like it's made of liquid jello, with anything I'm trying to grab sinking to the bottom, out of reach. It'll come to me. She's from down the street, and here she's walking by, waving at me like she's in a parade. She's peering in my window, probably wants to know what I'm up to. For a moment I think I'll tell her about what's going on at Edith's and see what she makes of it, but she's

such a busy-body. She'd tell the whole neighborhood. There was that time I just happened to mention that Edith's daughter had gotten divorced, and it got back to Edith that I was the one who'd told her, and Edith didn't speak to me for a month. I think she's still mad at me.

Suddenly, there's action next door, someone coming out. That same gal I saw two days ago. I can't get a good look from this angle, but she's dragging a big black bag. It's on wheels but you can tell it's heavy by the way she's hauling it up the driveway and lifting it into her car. Oh Lordy...maybe it's a body. That's why she's been so sneaky. Suppose that's Edith, she isn't in Florida at all, she's in that bag, they've murdered her and she's taking the body to the dump.

Sam thinks I'm obsessed with murder mysteries. I do like them. On the TV, I mean. I watch the same shows over and over. Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are my favorites. You'd think I would remember who dunnit from one time to the next, but I always forget. I like seeing the same characters. They keep me company.

I suddenly recall that Edith keeps a spare key under a geranium pot in her backyard. At least she used to. I could go over while the gal is out, let myself in, and check things out. Maybe I'm getting myself in a state over nothing, but it would put my mind at ease. If something fishy is going on, wouldn't be right for me to ignore it. Edith and I are good friends—at least we used to be. I suppose we're not *close* close, but you can't live next door to someone for forty years and sit by and do nothing.

I scamper around the side of her house, checking to make sure Mrs. Mitchell—that's her name, told you it would come to me—make sure she isn't walking by again, and I find the key under the pot by the back door. It's in a small plastic bottle with a screw top, damp and rusty from the elements. For a moment I think I'm never going to open it with these arthritic hands of mine. But I stretch my fingers and rub them together to warm them and give it another go, and *there*, the lid creeks open and the key plops into my palm.

But the door won't unlock. I jiggle the key and try pushing and pulling, but it won't budge. Her back door has those small square panes of glass, and a white lacey curtain so I can't see inside. Then

it occurs to me: I could smash through the pane closest to the lock and reach in to open it. I'm not exactly in the habit of doing this sort of thing, but I owe it to Edith.

I see a broken pot under her deck, along with an overturned rusty lawn chair. Turns out, it's a lot harder than you think to smash a window. The pot doesn't do the trick, so I resort to the leg of the lawn chair, and that works, but boy, it makes a lot of noise, and I'm terrified someone will hear me. Then I have all the jagged glass to work around. I finally get myself into the kitchen, step carefully over the broken glass on the floor, and survey the scene.

Everything seems spick and span inside. There's a stack of mail and a vase with fresh flowers on the counter and a long note written on yellow lined paper. *Welcome Home!* it says at the top in fancy lettering decorated with colored squirls and squiggles. "*Willamena will be happy to see you. She probably won't admit that she slept on the bed with me the past two nights. Ha ha!*" And on and on it goes, Willamena this and Willamena that.

I'm trying to take this in and wondering what to do next, when I hear someone at the front door, down at the far end of the hall, letting themselves in with a key. Yikes! Must be the girl returning or *damn*, maybe the boyfriend. I grab a knife from the block on the counter, and duck for cover. And then I hear a meowing and purring and ...*what?* It's Edith's voice, saying, "Hi Sweetie, I'm home," and I think *Oh my God, what the hell am I doing?*

Somehow, I manage to get myself out of there. I retreat out the back door and creep along the side of her house in a crouching position that does a number on my knees. I get home and collapse onto the couch, my heart pounding. I realize I don't know what I did with the knife, and *shoot*, I should have wiped my fingerprints off the backdoor. What a mess.

At least I know Edith is okay. Good to know everything is in order, and Willamena was well cared for. But my legs are still jittery from the excitement. I can't let Sam know about this. He would go nuts. Never mind Edith. Oh Lordy, here she comes now, walking up my steps. She'll want to know if I heard anyone breaking in. I'll deny all knowledge, of course, say I never heard a thing. But I'll open the door and stand under the awning, me with my mask on, her six feet away, and maybe we'll have a good chat. Just like old times. □

Call to Action

Heimir Steinarsson

Democracy, according to observers, is now going through a major crisis everywhere and anarchy is in the air.

And so the obvious question is:
How could we let it come to this?
And what are we to do about
the way that things are turning out?

We could just look away and leave
the aggravated world to grieve
those years of peace and unity
that now belong to history.

Or we could hand the power to
those self-indulgent braggarts, who
proclaim themselves to be the cure
for all the troubles we endure.

Well, I for one will not sit still
and let these bastards have their will.
I'll join the protests, where I'll be
defending our Democracy.





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