

Tired Evening

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On a Sunday evening, Mrs. Betty Gruber sat quietly in her living room after dinner, writing her errand list for the next day on scrap paper. She had written down the places to go—the grocery store, the cleaners, and the pharmacy—and tried to make up her mind which to visit, when, without being able. Betty Gruber was used to this kind of indecision. Her worn, creased face showed it as did her light red hair that had lost its best color and was fading into a drab brown. Her pale brown eyes had a cynical, hard expression and her eyelids hung low as if with a perpetually tired feeling. She was at the indefinite stage that lies between fat and thin, a result of many failed diets. She had dressed today without much mind for her appearance. She had on a loose, striped T-shirt and worn khaki pants, less than a favorite, but ready clothes; on her feet were a pair of white, cracked house shoes. At lunchtime, Betty had walked around the neighborhood hoping to feel more alive than she had in the last few weeks. Betty lived in a district of attractive historic homes and went out with a plan to see several of them. She wound up wandering not long after she began, going one street to the next without knowing the reason. "Well, I'm only walking around for fun," she had thought to re-assure herself. "There's no harm to it." Betty walked a long while where she had little interest. The hard asphalt road and the sidewalk reflected the day's heat and the sun's glare as she went, bewildering and annoying her. She had considered at times that she was walking from the handsome homes and grand trees she had meant to visit. She did not change course because of it. Betty returned home, tired and unfulfilled, and continued to feel so into the evening.

On the couch separated from her by half a cushion sat her husband Jon. Jon was an absentminded, homely man. He was tall and thin like a celery stalk and had straight, brown hair that lay out of form on his head. His pure, brown eyes were like small chocolates and his dark, thick mustache much like a softened candy bar atop his lips. He wore a gray sports-style sweatshirt and long, relaxed khaki pants, a favorite pair. He was reading the day's newspaper, his eyes glazed and dull, for the paper had little except political news, but he made to seem interested as if he might hope it into being otherwise. He finally put down the paper and said, as if the theme came naturally for them, "Have you spoken lately with our neighbor?"

"Which one?"

"The ones in the blue house."

Betty recalled the neighboring family. They were a couple with two children, the woman of the family, a heavy, cheerful person. When she tried to remember the woman's name, Betty drew a blank. "No, not lately. What about them?"

"They put up a new deck last week."

"Yes, I saw when I was hanging laundry."

"Well what do you think? Doesn't it look attractive?"

"Yes. A very nice, bright red." *Wasn't a new deck supposed to look attractive?* she thought. The neighborhood people did a lot to ensure all their homes were. Two houses down, the couple had installed old style front doors that now gave their house an up-scale appearance. At the corner, a family had installed a bay window, a standardized model, nothing beautiful or unique but large and expensive. While unimpressed, Betty had felt obliged to praise it to a friend.

"We may bring it up when we ask them to our party in a few weeks," Jon said.

"You mean the neighbors?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps."

"Whom are we inviting for the party anyway?"

"I'm still deciding, though really I'd be happy with whomever." Betty considered that their friends were all good for talk, so any of them would make good guests. Their parties seemed always to find some way to turn out decently with the friends who came. As she thought this, Betty recalled a party where she had had to talk with her husband's friend Ted Sommers. Ted had told her about the new desk and chair installed in the back room of his electronics store. She had smiled and smiled at Ted as he seemed to talk forever. Betty recalled then her failure to understand a bit of the story her friend Francine told while the other guests listened glued with attention.

"I'll choose some guests for us, but you think of some you'd like too."

Jon picked up the remote control lying on the couch cushion and turned on the TV. The program was an adventure/investigation show that featured a man in a business suit carrying a gun. He walked panting nervously atop some office building. Jon watched the show with interest but Betty could not. Once she caught the image of the main character crawling through an air vent, then, after a long time, a scene where the man was shooting bullets quickly. She lost the narrative somewhere in between and could not piece together what happened. At one point, the man on the screen was running and Jon, very amused, turned and made some comment. Betty watched Jon's lips move but did not comprehend him. Perhaps he said something I should have heard, she thought. The adventure program ended and Jon changed the channel to a comedy re-run that Betty disliked. "I'm going upstairs to take a

shower," she said standing.

"Okay." Intent on the TV, Jon did not lift his head to her.

Betty went upstairs to their bedroom and undressed in the adjacent bathroom. She was glad to be free of the clothes that she had worn since the overheated morning and dropped them into the hamper without a second thought. She turned on the water, checking it was warm but not hot, and stepped into the shower tub. She took the soap and lathered her body and limbs, richly and white. However, Betty did not feel clean as she washed because the water seemed to cling to her. She knew the water was not hard (they had tested it) so could not figure why it should feel so. She bent and shifted to clean her body, the water seeming to stick to her the whole time. At last she finished the shower, turned off the water and grabbed a big, cotton towel by the tub to dry herself. As she rubbed the cloth against her, the blood in her limbs warmed and the flesh beneath the towel seemed to resist her motion. She put on a bathrobe that felt too warm for her and stepped from the shower.

Betty walked into the bedroom, got a change of shirt, bra, and shorts from the dresser, and put them on. Her bed lay right by the chair where she sat changing into the clothes and she noted the new white bed sheet and cover for the blanket she had installed that afternoon. Beyond the bed was the bay window; its curtains were pulled back revealing the night sky. The clean, neat look of the bed, seen by the oblique light from the bathroom, made her think she should lie down in it and rest. She pulled back the sheets, got into the bed sitting up, and covered her legs in the blanket. The white, fresh sheets were cool and smooth on her bare legs. She worked her leg a little against them and enjoyed it. Then she stopped moving and just sat. She felt at ease for the first time that day and gazed out the window at the sky. The night was dark and the stars shone strong and clear. To the side of the window showed the edge of a maple, dense and dark.

A memory suddenly came to Betty. When she was a girl of ten, she and her family had gone one night to a newly cut hay field in the country. Though dark, she had seen the field well, dotted with its tall, golden haystacks and far away, a line of maples at the field's edge. The farmer who owned the field was standing by a large fire in the hay stubble and some stones. He greeted her father, who was a friend, along with her brother and herself when they came to him. The farmer's family stood beside him; his boy and girl greeted Betty. The heat from the fire had come to her wonderful and warm and she had been happy for it after tramping across the cold field. Above her in the night had been a very clear sky filled with hundreds of stars. Beside the fire, she craned her head back far to look at them. They had been a wonderful, great number, each standing clear against the night and Betty had felt the whole universe was there before her. And she had thought then the world was clear, sharp, and bright. She had been happy and she had loved the field, the fire, the farmer's kindness, and the many stars.

Yes, it had been beautiful, Betty thought seated in her bed. But where did that wonder and beauty that she had known go? What had she done to lose it? Why, she asked herself, was she unhappy? Her walks were long and pointless on more days than just today. Jon talked to her and on many evenings, she did not hear him. Betty sat in the bed and tried to think why. But all she managed to tell herself was that she was tired. She might always be too tired now to think why.

