

Dead Leaves

by Varya Kartishai

The subway surface trolley opened its doors; telling myself this was no time to lose my nerve, I stuffed the help wanted page into my pocket and got on. There was a window seat, but nothing to see except endless dark tunnel. The rhythmic clicking of the wheels against the rails had almost lulled me to sleep, when I realized that daylight was coming through the dusty windows. I jumped up as the driver called out "Cedar", and got out just in time. Forty-six eleven was in sight, not far from the corner - a two story brick single with a wrap-around porch, in pretty good shape other than needing a little paint. I allowed myself a couple of minutes hesitation on the uneven sidewalk, one foot planted on a brick hill that had been pushed up by the roots of a big catalpa tree, the other in a valley, but the nearly flat leather purse in my pocket spurred me on. My total worldly wealth - seventeen-fifty and three SEPTA tokens - was not going to get me through the day after tomorrow. Mrs. Henson was going to shuffle up the stairs in her fuzzy slippers, shake her pink curlers and demand sixty-five dollars to cover another week of residence in my bijou furnished room. When the Henson hand

remained empty, consternation would set in. "Companion to elderly lady, live-in, light housekeeping" had to be an improvement. I pulled myself together, pinned up a light brown braid that was threatening to dangle down my forehead and marched up the three cement steps to the varnished oak front door. As I was reaching for the brass key of the old-fashioned bell, it swung open. A soft voice with a harsh undertone said, "Step in, girly". She must have been standing there watching me. The empty glass door panel had fooled me, she only came up to my chin and I'm just 5 foot 3. Faded green eyes deeply sunken in a pale lined face looked me over from head to foot.

"Mrs. Murket?"

"Well, who else would I be? Come in if you're coming; don't just stand there letting the cold in."

Since that seemed all the invitation I was likely to get, I followed her down the linoleum-floored hallway. We turned into a parlor overfilled with heavy oak furniture that reminded me of my grandma's place. I took the armchair she pointed to, sinking deep into dusty-smelling maroon plush, feeling the prickles through my thin skirt. She took a straight chair opposite, her eyes focused on my left hand, where a lighter band of skin proclaimed my newly ringless state.

"Single?"

"Separated." The bleak two-year "marriage" that had just ended wasn't any of her business.

She launched into a complicated description of the job requirements. I forced my wandering thoughts into focus in time to pick up "...shopping, three meals, clean, wash clothes and take care of my plants". I nodded as if I'd heard everything, and she went on, "Fifty dollars a week and found."

"Found?"

She sniffed at my ignorance, "Room and board. One afternoon off a week, twelve to six. Paid every other week. Well?"

Did she guess the alternative was homelessness? Trying to sound confident, I answered, "When do you want me to start?"

"Bring your things tomorrow morning at nine."

I didn't hear anything, but she turned her head; a bulky figure was looming in the doorway.

"Bill, this is Susan Windsor. She's going to do the housework. Bill takes care of Merwyn, my last boarder." She dismissed him with a nod of her head, and he left as silently as he had come.

"Merwyn's in a wheelchair, you won't see much of either of them, except at meals."

That was fine with me; I loosened myself from the clinging upholstery, buttoned my sweater and headed for the door. "All right, I'll be back tomorrow."

Next morning when I struggled up to the porch with my suitcase, she was there waiting.

"It's the front room, next to the bathroom. Take your things up and come right down, I need some errands run."

I climbed the uncarpeted flight to an adequate but uninviting room, and wrestled my case onto the painted iron bed; a thin pillow covered with striped ticking lay at the head, and a patched pillowcase rested with folded sheets on an army blanket at the foot of the bare mattress. Frayed brown shades masked the windows from the street; the only nod to décor was a ten-year-old drugstore calendar hanging over the oak dresser. I got down in less than ten minutes, but she was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, foot tapping. "You'll need to get groceries. The store is two blocks east. Here's the list; bring me a receipt with the change."

She handed me a sheet of yellow lined paper folded around a worn twenty. I gave it a quick glance - if I had been inclined that way, there wouldn't be anything left to

pocket. Biting back a rude remark, I went out the door and turned east. A few doors down, a cracked voice muttered, "Spare change?" A ragged bundle at the edge of the curb unfolded itself into the figure of a woman. I fished out a couple of quarters, thinking, "There but for the grace of God," and a hand with broken fingernails snatched at the coins, stowing them somewhere in the layers of grimy fabric. On the way back I looked for her, but the curb was empty.

When I walked back in, my new employer directed me to the kitchen and recited the menu for the day while I pulled out the groceries and put them away - at least she didn't expect fancy cooking. She watched everything I did, nodded, then said, "I hope you're good with plants," and motioned me to follow her down the hall to the dining room. When she opened the oak double door, at first I thought the shades were down, but then I realized there were no shades. Instead of the snake plants and African violets I had expected, both windows were almost completely blocked by a mass of vines. They were growing out of a pair of big, ugly red china urns, one to a sill. The windows were open an inch or so at the top in spite of her aversion to cold air, and a soft rustling sound came from the pointed leaves, waving in almost constant motion

"They get watered every other day, about a cup apiece, starting tomorrow. On weekends you add a spoonful of fertilizer to the water. Take care not to touch the leaves, they're sensitive, and they sting like nettles." She indicated a large measuring pitcher, and a couple of tins. There was no way I was going to touch the things, I thought to myself. Part of my first paycheck was going to go for a watering can with an extra long spout. I could just make out fine curly hair like cactus spines covering the backs of the leaves. Clumps of brown withered leaves hung here and there, but they could stay that way. Those things weren't going to get trimmed by me.

As lunchtime was imminent, I went to the kitchen to put together the salami sandwiches she had ordered, and was relieved when she said that meals would be in there. That chilly room with the rustling plants would spoil anybody's appetite. A rattling noise announced Bill wheeling Merwyn in - late middle age, graying, with a bald spot poking through the top, and spilling a little over the sides of his chair. Both of them ate with noisy concentration, and Mrs. Murket didn't say anything when I took a second sandwich. After cleaning up from lunch, I dusted some of the teeming bric-a-brac in the parlor, fixed the tuna casserole for dinner and swept up the crumbs after it

vanished. Finally, about eight, I was released to go to my room, but another batch of orders followed me. "There's a bolt on your door, use it. If you need the bathroom after ten, there's a chamber under your bed. I don't want any wandering around the hall at night. Bill is a man, and I don't tolerate hanky-panky; understand? Be down at seven to start breakfast."

Well, none of that would be a problem. I was too tired to wander the hall, and the silent, hulking Bill wasn't my idea of a partner for hanky-panky. Maybe when my pay showed up, I could buy some reading material along with the watering can. I took yesterday's newspaper up with me to line the dresser drawers, installed my meager wardrobe and made up the bed, adding a few sheets of newspaper over the sheet to help out the inadequate blanket. The slightly rusty water that trickled into the bathroom's claw foot tub was lukewarm, not hot, but no worse than Mrs. Henson's. Cleaner but chilly, I quickly slipped into pajamas and back into my room, bolted the door as indicated and got into bed. The noisily creaking bedsprings guaranteed that hanky-panky in this house would hardly be discreet. I was dead tired, but sleep didn't come right away; there were too many noises to get used to. I heard the old lady come up the stairs and go into the room next to mine, then out

again to the bathroom. When she went back to her room, she bolted the door, although I couldn't imagine even Bill being attracted to her charms. The two rooms next to hers stood open and empty - the men must sleep downstairs. With Merwyn's wheelchair stairs would be impossible. I was just dozing off when I heard a peculiar rustling sound that seemed to move up the stairs and down the hall. Mice, maybe, or rats; I wasn't inclined to investigate.

In the morning, I made coffee and scrambled eggs, and the men plowed into them enthusiastically. Merwyn spoke for the first time, remarking that the coffee was better. Mrs. Murket snorted, then informed me that as soon as the dishes were done I could go to the bank. This time she pointed me west, and as I set out, there was the grimy woman again, seated on the next-door curb. I gave her a couple more quarters from my dwindling supply, and she managed a shy smile and told me her name was Madge. On the way back, I got a look at the vine-covered dining room windows from the outside. I already had a creepy feeling about those vines, now I saw that there was a little line of dead sparrows lying on the porch below the windows. Their heads looked twisted, and I wondered if they had broken their necks running into the glass, although I would have thought it was dirty enough to be visible. If Mrs. M.

wanted them washed, I was going to tell her I didn't do windows - watering those plants was bad enough. A few leaf clusters were hanging out over the tops of the frames, and the wind made them move in a way that looked like they were reaching toward me. Mrs. M. met me at the door and took the envelope of cash, complaining that I had taken a long time for someone with young legs. She started counting it before she had finished complaining, and I escaped into the kitchen, where I filled the pitcher for the plants and carried it to the dining room. Very gingerly I poured a cupful into each urn, standing back as far as I could, trying not to be nauseated by the sucking sound the earth made as it absorbed the water and the smell of moldy earth that rose up from it. Later on, when she finally released me for the evening, I checked the closets in the empty rooms and managed to snag an extra blanket to help out the flimsy one I had. One of the few things I missed from being "married" was the warmth from another body in the bed.

Next day, another trip to the grocery. On the way back, I heard steps matching mine, and realized someone was walking beside me. It was Bill, when he saw I had noticed he smiled and offered to carry one of the bags. The smile made his slightly battered face with the flattened nose

look a lot better; I wondered whether he had ever done any boxing, but said only, "Sure, thanks," thinking even Mrs. M. couldn't object to bag carrying. He asked how I was getting on, and I said it was pretty much what I had expected, other than the plants giving me the creeps. He stopped walking and asked, "Did she tell you anything about those?" I shook my head, not sure I wanted to know. He said, "Those plants are growing in her husband's ashes."

I stopped in my tracks, and felt like throwing up. He seemed to be waiting for me to say something, so I got hold of myself and said weakly, "Maybe she wants to keep him with her". But he responded, "I don't know why; they used to fight all the time. He was a real lech; they couldn't keep help too long - he'd hit on them, and she'd fire them. He died kind of suddenly. I wouldn't be surprised if she slipped something into his beer." We were near the house and I grabbed the bag back, said thanks and hurried in. I had heard all I wanted about that subject.

Saturday I gave the plants their fertilizer, which turned out to be bone meal and blood meal; that was vaguely creepy, but maybe they were bulbs - I had read bulbs like bone meal. I was really looking forward to that watering can. I hadn't talked to Mrs. M. about the plants or anything else, but I was hoping she would be approachable

soon, because while I was starting to get used to the night sounds of the place, except for the rustling noises in the hall, I wanted to ask her about getting an exterminator. Almost every time I swept the upstairs hallway, I would find little tufts of curling grayish hairs - too long for mice and the thought of rats really scared me.

We had a little excitement Monday night - I was sound asleep, when I woke suddenly to the sound of a woman screaming. I pulled on some clothes and ran downstairs. The lights were on, the side door was standing open and Bill was out on the porch with Madge trying to calm her down. She had been sleeping there, and between hysterical sobs, said something like a giant bug had been crawling on her, touching her all over. She unbuttoned the top of her ragged shirt to show her chest covered with red welts. I offered to get her some lotion, but she shook her head, so I went in and made her some tea and some toast, which she insisted on eating outside. Then she said she felt better, but she was going to find someplace else to sleep, and wandered off down the street. When we went back in I told Bill about the rats but he didn't seem convinced. Mrs. M. never came down at all, but next morning, she fussed because two slices of bread were missing; she must count the bread. Bill said he got hungry and made himself some

toast; neither of us said anything about what had happened. The next few days were quiet enough, except Friday, when I had to go to the store in the rain. The vestibule only has one of those little candle bulbs, and when I reached into the umbrella stand I grabbed something that wasn't an umbrella - it felt like skin. Before I could stop myself, I yelped, and suddenly Bill was there, but when he saw what I was holding, he laughed and explained that Merwyn kept his artificial leg in there when he wasn't using it. I felt pretty silly, but he apologized for laughing, took it from me and handed me an umbrella. I was almost getting to like him, but Saturday, I wished he hadn't told me anything about the plants. When I was giving them the fertilizer, the sun came out and some light struck through the windows, outlining a clump of dead leaves near where I was standing. When I saw the silhouette against the light, a chill went down my spine. It looked like a pair of folded hands, and the rest of them could have been the same shape. I got this horrible feeling that the plants were leaning closer, watching me. I finished as fast as I could and got out of there.

Finally Monday came; I got my pay and the afternoon off. It felt good to have some money, but after buying a watering can and a few paperbacks, I decided to open an

account for myself at Mrs. M's bank. That didn't take long, and I wasn't inclined to spend any more, so I wandered around aimlessly window shopping for a while, got tired of it and went back around five-thirty. As I closed the front door behind me, I heard what sounded like Mrs. M's voice in the dining room. That was odd - the men generally kept out of her way except at meals, there hadn't been any visitors since I came and the phone was in the kitchen. As I got closer to the door, I was sure the voice was hers but I couldn't hear anybody else. Was she talking to herself?

"You randy fool, you'll go next door and take care of that Thurman bitch, or I'll take away the little life you have left," it broke off suddenly. I was wearing sneakers, but she must have heard the floor creaking, because she came out into the hall, closing the door behind her.

"Did you enjoy your afternoon off?"

"Yes, thanks, but it's a little chilly for walking around. I'll get started on dinner."

She went upstairs; I had gotten a quick look through the open door as she came out, but there was nothing in there except those rustling plants.

Another week went by, and on my next afternoon off, I ran into Bill outside the bank. He invited me to stop into

the diner for some pie and coffee, and I said, "Sure, why not." We chatted for a while about nothing in particular; I was starting to feel comfortable with him. I caught him eyeing my two-tone ring finger, so it was no surprise when he asked whether I was married. I hadn't meant to tell anybody, but I found myself blabbing about how for almost two years I stupidly thought I was Mrs. John Greene, until one day when I was getting the wash together to go to the laundromat, I found the credit cards and driver's licenses with other names, pinned inside his trouser pocket in a little pouch.

"Poor kid. Couldn't you go home to your family?"

"I haven't got any family left. My grandmother raised me, and she's gone." He seemed genuinely concerned, and I felt a little less like an idiot. Finally I told him about overhearing Mrs. M. talking to no one in the dining room. "I got the feeling there was somebody next door she didn't like."

He laughed, and said there sure was, Mrs. Thurman, and probably a long list besides, if you included Mr. M.'s old girlfriends, tradespeople she thought had cheated her, and other neighbors that hadn't done favors when she asked. "Maybe she's using the old reprobate's ashes for dabbling in black magic."

"That's horrible! You don't really believe that?"

"Till a better explanation comes along. Just keep your door locked at night; but I don't think you have to worry - she needs you."

Suddenly I felt glad that I had started the savings account. Maybe when it got a little bigger, I could start looking for another job, although the ads in the paper were pretty sparse. I still hadn't gotten the nerve to ask her about the rats, and next morning when I was making her bed, I regretted it. There was a faint rustling noise coming from the corner behind the dresser. It was the first time I had heard a noise like that in the daytime. I quickly pulled the blankets smooth and got out of there - no way was I going to investigate. She came out of the kitchen while I was sweeping the front hall, and I decided to say something, but she just got angry and asked why I thought she had money to waste on exterminators. I didn't answer, but that night before I went to bed, I checked every baseboard in the hall, the bathroom and my own room for holes, and listened for noises as I lay in bed for a long time before I finally dozed off. About eleven, I was jolted awake by Mrs. M's voice yelling, "Get out, you don't belong up here! Just do as you were told!" I jumped out of bed and hurried into my clothes, thinking maybe Bill had

come upstairs against orders. As I slipped my shoes on, her voice got shriller and shriller, finally escalating into incoherent screaming punctuated by thumping noises. I ran out into the hall, fastening buttons as I went. The lights were on and Bill was there, standing outside her closed door, kicking at it, but the bolt was holding. I yelled, "What are you doing?" He turned toward me, the screaming hit a peak, then choked off, and I heard the rustling noise of the rats coming up the stairs. Bill looked in that direction and his face froze into a expression of horror. He leaped toward me, and before I knew what he was doing, he had thrown me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and was running down the hall toward the back stairs. I turned my head so I could see the front stairs, and was sorry I had done it when I saw what was crawling up into the hall. The bare floor was covered almost wall to wall with a writhing carpet. Not rats - more like slowly moving tarantulas, one limb, one finger bending at a time, an army of brown, leafy hands was crawling toward Mrs. M.'s door. Too big to fit into the narrow crack beneath it, they shook themselves apart, reformed into smaller units, then slithered underneath like water bugs. As we ran, there was a horrible choking gurgle, then only the faint rustling barely audible over

the noise of Bill's feet thundering down the back stairs. We burst into the room he shared with Merwyn, who was sitting on the edge of his bed wrapped in a robe. Bill dumped me on the other twin bed, got Merwyn loaded into his wheelchair, threw a blanket over him, and the three of us fled coatless out the back door to pound on the door of the next house. Mrs. Thurman had called the police when the screaming started, and let us in right away. Bill told her, and the police when they arrived, that there had been an invasion of rats, and he thought Mrs. M. might have been frightened to death. It was simpler to agree with him; nobody would have believed the truth. When the police went into the house and broke down her locked bedroom door, they found her lying on the floor behind it, her hands crooked as if she had been clawing at the bolt. They described her nightgown in tatters and her body covered with red welts, her mouth still open in a silent scream, but they didn't mention the leaves. Mrs. Thurman gave us tea and we sat in her living room till it got light. When we went back, Bill locked up the dining room and sealed the bottom of the door with duct tape, but I still didn't feel safe.

Horror or not, the body still has needs, and we were all hungry. I made breakfast, wondering miserably what I was going to do now, and hardly noticed when Merwyn

complimented me on my coffee again. If his nerves were as shot as mine, he was letting it out in nonstop talk, barely pausing to shovel in food. He announced that he was going to arrange for Mrs. M.'s funeral, then totally surprised me by asking if I wanted to stay on and keep house for the two of them. I thanked him as politely as I could, but explained a little emphatically that there was no way I would stay in the house with those vines. Besides, I added, her family would probably be selling the place. I thought I had hit the peak of being shocked, but when he said, "Oh no, it's my house," I dropped my coffee cup on the floor. Bill waved me back into my chair and mopped up the mess efficiently while Merwyn continued, "She was short of cash, and I loaned her money with the house as collateral. Besides, there's no family, and I plan to arrange something with the undertaker so that Mr. M.'s ashes can get a proper resting place - not too close to Mrs. M. If you're too nervous to stay here, we can get you a hotel room for a couple of days till we get things sorted out." Then he sweetened the pot with an offer to raise my salary to seventy-five a week, saying he really liked my cooking. Both of them smiled at me, and I felt more welcome than I ever had in my life.

END