VINTAGE

THE CLOCK WINDER

ANNE TYLER

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About the Book

Having sacked her handyman, newly-widowed Mrs Emerson finds a replacement in Elizabeth, a lanky, awkward girl. The Emersons – there are seven grown-up children – have a reputation for craziness and Elizabeth finds herself drawn into their disorderly lives against her will. But in the end it is hard to tell whether she is a victim of the needy Emersons, or the *de facto* ruler of the family.

About the Author

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis in 1941. She is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Breathing Lessons* and other bestselling novels, including *The Accidental Tourist, Saint Maybe, Ladder of Years, A Patchwork Planet, The Amateur Marriage*, and, most recently, *Digging to America*. In 1994 she was nominated by Roddy Doyle and Nick Hornby as ‘the greatest novelist writing in English’. She has lived for many years with her family in Baltimore, where her novels are set.

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The Clock Winder

Anne Tyler

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THE HOUSE HAD outlived its usefulness. It sat hooded and silent, a brown shingleboard monstrosity close to the road but backed by woods, far enough from downtown Baltimore to escape the ashy smell of the factories. The uppermost windows were shuttered; the wrap-around veranda, with its shiny gray floorboards and sky-blue ceiling, remained empty even when neighbours' porches filled up with children and dogs and drop-in visitors. Yet clearly someone still lived there. A pile of raked leaves sat by the walk. A loaded bird-feeder hung in the dogwood tree. And in the side yard, Richard the handyman stood peeing against a rosebush with his profile to the house and his long black face dreamy and distant.

Now out popped Mrs Emerson, skin and bones in a shimmery gray dress that matched the floorboards. Her face was carefully made up, although it was not yet ten in the morning. Whatever she planned to say was already stirring her pink, pursed lips. She crossed the veranda rapidly on clicking heels. She descended the steps gingerly, sideways, holding tight to the railing. 'Richard?' she said. 'What is that I see you doing?'

'Just cutting back the roses is all,' Richard said. His back was turned to her. He waved a pair of pruning shears behind him, hip-high.

'I meant what you're doing at this *moment*, Richard.'

'Oh, why, nothing,' Richard said.

It was true. He was zipped up by now, free to turn and beam and click his shears on thin air. Mrs Emerson stopped in front of him and folded her arms.

‘Don’t try to get around *me*, Richard. I looked out my window and saw you. I thought, *Richard?* Is that Richard?’

‘I was preparing to cut back the roses,’ Richard said.

‘Is that what you call it?’

Richard had a special set of gestures he made when embarrassed – pivoting on his heels with his head hanging down, working something over in his hands. He twisted the rubber grips on his shears and said, ‘It’s getting time, now. Fall is coming on.’

‘That house you are standing by is Mrs Walter Bell’s,’ said Mrs Emerson. ‘In full clear view of her dining room window. Don’t think that I won’t hear about this.’

‘*I* wasn’t doing nothing, Mrs Emerson.’

‘Oh, hush.’

‘I was only cutting back the roses.’

‘Just hush. I don’t know, I really don’t know,’ said Mrs Emerson.

‘You’re just distraught nowadays, that’s all.’

‘Distraught? Why would I be distraught?’ said Mrs Emerson. ‘Oh, give me those shears, hand them over. You’re fired.’

Richard stopped twisting the shears. He looked up at her with his mouth open, his face jutting forward as if he had trouble seeing her. ‘Ah, now,’ he said.

‘I’ll cut back my own damn roses.’

‘Now Mrs Emerson, you know you don’t mean that. You’d never just *fire* me. Why, I been working here twenty-five years, not counting the war. Planted them roses myself, watered them daily. Do I have to tell you that?’

‘I don’t know what kind of watering you’re talking about,’ said Mrs Emerson. ‘but you’re leaving anyway. Don’t expect wages, either. It’s only Monday, and you were paid Friday. You’ve been here not half an hour yet and most of that time

ill-spent. Oh, I looked out that window and thought I was seeing things. I thought, What have we come to, after all? What's it going to be next? First Emmeline, letting my transistor radio run down, and then no sooner do I let *her* go than *you* start in. Well, you can send your new employers to me for a reference but don't expect me to cover up for you. "Works well," I'll say, "but tinkles on the flowers." Maybe *some* won't mind.'

'Couldn't you just take a little longer over this?'

Mrs Emerson raised her chin and looked past him, twiddling with the empty sleeves of her sweater. She said, 'Longer? Why should I take longer? I've made up my mind.'

'But if you gave it your thought, some. Who could you find that would work as good as me?'

'Whole multitudes,' said Mrs Emerson, 'but I won't be looking. I'm too disappointed. Everywhere I turn there is someone failing me. Well, that's the end of that. From now on I'll do it all myself.'

'Paint the shutters? Keep that creaky old plumbing fixed? Climb up to clean the gutters in them little spiky shoes?'

Mrs Emerson had already turned to go. She paused, lifting one hand to test a curl. It was a sign of uncertainty and Richard knew it, but then he had to go and ruin it for himself. 'You'll be calling me back, Mrs E.,' he said. '*You'll* call.'

'Never,' said Mrs Emerson.

Then she went off on tiptoe, to keep from sinking into the lawn.

She kept a pack of playing cards on her dining room table. She sat down on the edge of a chair, smoothing her skirt beneath her, and reached for the cards and began laying out a game of solitaire with sharp little snaps. Her breathing was too rapid. She made a point of slowing it, sitting erect, aligning the cards carefully before she started playing. But

unfinished questions kept running through her head. Should she have –? How could he –? Why had she –?

The sun from the bay window fuzzed the edges of the sweater draping her shoulders, lit the flecks of powder across the bridge of her nose. She had once been very pretty. She still was, but now that her children were grown there was something brave about the prettiness. She had started having to work for it. She had to fight the urge to spend her days in comfortable shoes and forget her chin-strap and let herself go. Mornings, patting a pearly base coat over her cheekbones, she noticed how she seemed to be falling into separate pieces. Her face was a series of pouches tenuously joined by transparent skin, reminding her of the tissue-covered frames of model airplanes that her sons used to make. Her close-set blue eyes were divided by minute cracks. Her mouth had bunched in upon itself so that she permanently wore the sulky look she had once had as a child. All she had left was color – pink, white, blond, most of it false. Weekly she went to the hairdresser and returned newly gilded, with her scalp feeling tight as if it were drawing away from her face. She dressed up for everything, even breakfast. She owned no slacks. Her thin, sharp legs were always in ultra-sheer stockings, and her closet was full of those spike-heeled shoes that made her arches ache. But when her children visited and she stood at the door to meet them, wearing pastels, holding out smooth white hands with polished nails, she had seen how relieved they looked. Relieved and a little disappointed: she had survived their desertion, she had not become a broken old lady after all.

She put the red seven on the black eight. Now the six could go up. She looked across the table, out the bay window, and saw Richard standing exactly where she had left him. His shoulders were slumped. The pruning shears were dangling from one hand. Would still more be expected of her? But as she watched he dropped the shears and started off toward the toolshed behind the house. She would

have to put the shears away herself, then. She had no idea where they went.

She turned an ace up. Then another. Along came Richard, carrying an old suit jacket, a brown paper bag, a thermos bottle. He was plodding, that was the only word for it. Thinking she was watching. Well, she wasn't. She snapped the last card down, checked for possibilities one more time, and then hitched her bracelets back and gathered the cards into a deck again. When she next looked out the window, Richard was gone.

This house was full of clocks, one to a room – eight-day pendulum clocks that struck the hour and half-hour. Their striking was beautifully synchronized, but the winding was not. Some were due to be wound one day, some another. Only her husband had understood the system. (If there *was* a system.) When he died, three months ago, she considered letting all the clocks run down and then restarting them simultaneously, so that she could stop puzzling over which day to wind which one. But the symbolism involved – the tick, pause, tock, the pause and the final tick of the grandfather clock in the hall, the first to go – made her so nervous that she abandoned the plan. Anyone else would have just wound them all tightly on a given day, and carried on from there. Mrs Emerson didn't. (Wasn't there something about overtight mainsprings? Wouldn't her husband have done that years ago, otherwise? Oh, what was in his mind? What was the meaning of these endless rooms of clocks, efficiently going about their business while she twisted her hands in front of them?) Evenings she wandered through the house bewildered, opening the little glass or wooden doors and reaching for the keys and then pausing, her fingertips to her lips, her eyes round and vague as she counted back over the days of the week. She was not a stupid woman, but she was used to being taken care of. She had passed almost without a jolt from the hands of her father to the hands of

her husband, an unnoticeable sort of man who since his death had begun to seem much wiser and more mysterious. He knew answers to questions she had never thought of asking, and kept them to himself. He had wound the clocks absentmindedly, on his way to other places; he had synchronized their striking apparently without effort, without even mentioning it to her – but how? The grandfather clock in the hall was now a quarter-minute ahead of the others, and that was as close as she could get it after half a morning spent irritably shoving the hands back and forth, waiting for the whir of the little hammer as it prepared to strike.

It struck now. Then after a pause the others began: ten o'clock. And here she was with nothing to do, no one to talk to, alone in a sealed house with the last of her supports sent away. She rose from the table, touching a hand to her hair, and went to the front hall. On the bureau was a vase of marigolds which she spent minutes rearranging, changing nothing. She smoothed the linen runner beneath the vase. Then she opened the front door, intending to stir the dim, dust-flecked air. She was about to close it again when she caught sight of the outdoor furniture, which spilled in an uneven line down the veranda and on around the corner of the house. It would stay there year-round; it always had. No wonder this house was so depressing. She remembered how dismal the wicker loveseats looked in winter, the seams of their soggy cushions harboring wisps of snow; how the aluminum chairs dripped icicles and the rattan ones darkened and split and overturned in the wind. The picture came to her like an answer: everything would change for the better, if she moved the furniture before fall set in.

She rushed out with her skirt swirling around her, picked up the round metal tea-table and clicked down the front steps with it. Then around to the back yard – more forest than yard, slanting downward as steeply as a mountainside all the way to the garage, which was out of view. She

passed two empty trellises, a toolshed, a rotting gazebo, a stone bench, countless frayed, cut-off, cruel-looking ropes her children had once climbed and swung by. Spongy moss gave way beneath her heels, and brambles snagged her stockings. Birds started up from bushes as if she had no right to come this way. When she reached the garage she found that the side door was stuck. She gave it a kick with the pointed toe of her shoe. Then she heaved the table inside and started back up the hill. Already she was out of breath.

Next came a loveseat, bulky and awkward. She flung the sleeves of her sweater behind her and bent to tug at one wicker arm, but the legs kept catching on the floorboards. When she had pulled it to the steps she stopped to rest. Then someone on the street said, ‘Need a hand?’

She turned. A tall girl in dungarees was watching her. ‘I could take the other end,’ she was saying.

‘Oh, *would* you?’ said Mrs Emerson.

She stepped to the side, and the girl moved past her to scoop up one end of the loveseat. ‘It’s not heavy but it’s *clumsy,’* Mrs Emerson told her. The girl nodded, and followed her down around the house with the base of the love-seat resting easily in her hands. She certainly didn’t believe in wasting words. Every time Mrs Emerson looked back at her to smile apologetically (she really should have warned her about the distance they had to cover), all she saw was the top of a bent head – dark yellow hair hanging straight to her shoulders, a style Mrs Emerson considered drab. The girl didn’t comment on the steepness, or the brambles, or the fact that it seemed ludicrous to cart furniture through an apparently endless forest. When they reached the garage she disappeared inside, righted the tea-table, and reached out for the loveseat. ‘Any more going in?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Mrs Emerson said.

‘Well, then,’ said the girl, and she moved the two pieces of furniture down to the far end, opposite the car, making more space. Mrs Emerson waited outside with her arms folded. She could use this breathing spell. Now, should she offer a tip? But that might be an insult. And there was always the question of how *much* to offer. Oh, where was her husband, with his desk-size checkbook and his bills on a spindle and his wallet that unfolded so smartly whenever she was sad, offering her money for a new outfit or a trip to Washington?

The girl emerged from the garage, wiping her hands on the seat of her dungarees. ‘I certainly do appreciate this,’ Mrs Emerson told her. ‘I hope I haven’t held you up too much.’

‘Didn’t you say there was more?’

‘Oh, yes, all that’s left on the veranda.’

‘I’ll stay and help you finish, then.’

‘Well, goodness,’ said Mrs Emerson. She was glad of the help, but she wondered what kind of person would let herself get so sidetracked. Weren’t there any fixed destinations in her life? As they climbed back up the slope she kept glancing sideways at the girl’s face, which was pretty enough but Mrs Emerson thought it would take a good eye like her own to notice. Not a trace of make-up. What a nice bright lipstick could have done! She wore brown moccasins, shapeless and soft-soled. Ruining her arches. Her white shirt was painstakingly ironed, the creases knife-sharp across the shoulders and down the sleeves. A mother’s work, for certain – some poor mother wondering right this minute where her daughter had got to. But she hadn’t the strength of character to send her on her way. The girl looked so capable, hoisting up two chairs at once when they reached the veranda and swinging through the side yard with them. ‘Any time you get tired, now,’ said Mrs Emerson, compromising, ‘or have to be somewhere, or meet

someone –’ The girl was already too far down the path to hear her.

When they were climbing the slope again Mrs Emerson said, ‘I *used* to have a handyman. Did until this morning. He would have made short work of this. Then I caught him mistaking the nearest rosebush for the men’s room.’ The girl laughed – a single, low note that made Mrs Emerson look up at her, started. ‘Well, I fired him,’ she said. ‘I can’t have *that*.’

The girl said nothing. They rounded the house, climbed the front steps side by side. There seemed to be more furniture now than before; they hadn’t made a dent in it. ‘Where did they all *come* from?’ Mrs Emerson said, poking a chair with her foot. ‘I can’t remember ever buying any of this.’

‘Outdoor furniture is capable of reproducing,’ said the girl. Which made Mrs Emerson pause for a moment before she went on with her own train of thought.

‘Our family was once so big, you know,’ she said. ‘Seven children, all grown now. One married. And a grandchild. When they were still home these chairs got filled soon enough, believe me. Children and friends and boyfriends and neighbors, all just having a grand time.’ She was staring vaguely at a wooden rocker, although the girl was already halfway down the steps with her own load. ‘Ask anyone in these parts, they all know my children,’ she said. ‘It’s the Emersons,’ they’d tell each other, when we’d go sailing past in the car with everybody sitting in everybody’s lap. I am Pamela Emerson, by the way.’

‘I’m Elizabeth Abbott,’ said the girl.

She had stopped on the grass. She waited while Mrs Emerson dragged the rocker down the steps. Mrs Emerson said, ‘Abbott? It’s funny, I can’t remember seeing you here before.’

‘I haven’t *been* here. I come from North Carolina.’

‘Oh, I have cousins in North Carolina,’ said Mrs Emerson. ‘Not to know personally, of course. Are you just visiting?’

‘I’m going to see these people about a job.’

‘A job. Goodness,’ Mrs Emerson said, ‘and here you are moving furniture. Do you usually go at things in such a roundabout way?’

Elizabeth smiled. The whole of her face smiled. ‘Always,’ she said.

‘I just hope you won’t arrive late, that’s why I asked. The last thing I’d do is interfere but *I* have daughters, working daughters, and I can’t help telling you: first impressions are all-important. Promptness. Neatness.’

She was looking at Elizabeth’s shirt-tails, but Elizabeth didn’t notice; she had moved off now with her chairs. ‘They don’t know to expect me, anyway,’ she called back. ‘I saw their ad on a bulletin board in a thrift shop. I like getting jobs from bulletin boards. What they want is a mother’s helper, and I need to find out if that means housework or babysitting. Babysitting wouldn’t be good at all. I don’t like children.’

‘Is that right?’ Mrs Emerson said. She was trying to remember if she had ever heard anyone else admit to such a thing. She puffed along with the rocker, taking short rapid steps to keep up. ‘Now, I would have thought you were still in school.’

‘I am. I’m earning money for my senior year at college.’

‘In September?’

‘I’m taking a year off.’

‘Oh, that’s terrible!’ said Mrs Emerson. They had reached the garage by now. She set down the rocker to stare at Elizabeth, who seemed undisturbed. ‘Interrupting like that! It’s terrible. Why, one thing may lead to another and you may never get back. I’ve known that to happen.’

‘It’s true,’ Elizabeth agreed.

‘Couldn’t you get a scholarship? Or a loan?’

‘Oh, my grades were rotten,’ she said cheerfully.

‘Still, though. It’s no good to have to stop something in the middle. What does your father do, dear?’

‘He’s a minister.’

‘Nothing wrong with *that*. Although a lot depends on the denomination. What denomination is he?’

‘Baptist.’

‘Oh.’

‘If this job is babysitting,’ Elizabeth said, ‘I’ll just have to find me another bulletin board. But the friend that dropped me here said Roland Park was the likeliest neighborhood.’

She stacked her chairs inside the garage and reached for the rocker. Mrs Emerson said, ‘Do you know the people’s name? The ones you’re going to see?’

‘O’Donnell.’

‘O’Donnell. Well, I’ve never heard of *them* before. If it’s people I don’t know they’re generally young. New young people buying up these old houses for a song and moving in with children. But *children* aren’t so bad. What is it you have against them?’

‘I don’t like people you can have so much effect on,’ Elizabeth said.

‘What? Goodness,’ said Mrs Emerson.

They climbed back up the hill. It seemed to have grown steeper. Mrs Emerson’s palms were sore, and two fingernails had broken, and her stockings were in shreds. ‘If only my boys were home,’ she said. ‘If only I’d thought of this sometime when they were visiting. They’d have been glad to help. But I just never did, and then I asked myself, Why wait until they come? Why not do it myself, while the weather’s still warm and the sun so nice?’

She paused to catch her breath, one hand clamped to the small of her back. Elizabeth stopped too. ‘Would you like me to finish up for you?’ she asked.

‘No, no, I wouldn’t hear of it.’

‘It’ll only take a minute.’

‘I’m all right.’

They gathered up the next load and started back down. Mrs Emerson's heels kept slipping on dead leaves. This was all Richard's fault. He couldn't even rake properly. Slick brown leaves were scattered here and there, with moss or smooth earth beneath them instead of the grass he should have been growing. The chair she carried was knocking against her knees. Mean little tangled bramble bushes kept snatching her sweater off her shoulders. What would her husband say, if he could look down now and see how her life was turning out? She sighed raggedly, hitched the chair higher, wiped her forehead on her upper arm.

Then when they were just descending the steps to the garage, Mrs Emerson caught her heel and fell. She landed on top of the overturned chair, scraping both knees and the palm of one hand. 'Ooops, there!' she said, and gave a little tinkling laugh. Tears were stinging her eyelids. She reached for Elizabeth's hand and struggled to her feet. 'Oh, how ridiculous,' she said.

'Are you all right?'

'Of course I am.' She jerked her hand away and began brushing her skirt. 'I just caught my heel,' she said.

'Maybe you should rest a while.'

'No, I'm fine. Really.'

She lifted the chair again and one of its legs fell off – a white metal tube, rust specks seeping through a sloppy paint job. It clattered down the rest of the steps. She felt the tears pressing harder. 'It's broken,' she said. 'Isn't that ridiculous? It's just not my day. And Richard gone, too.' She fixed her eyes on the chair leg, which Elizabeth had picked up and was examining. 'If I had fired him *tomorrow*, now. Stayed in bed where I should have and kept my head under the covers and fired him tomorrow instead. Some days just anything I do is certain to bring ruin.'

'It can easily be mended,' Elizabeth said.

'What? Oh.'

'The screw must be somewhere around. I can fix it.'

‘Yes, but – *why* did I fire him? What got into me?’

‘You said –’ Elizabeth began.

‘Oh, that. He’s been tinkling on the roses for twenty-five years, not counting the war. Everybody knows that. It was just his flaw, something we avoided mentioning. Well, I *would* have, but I was uncertain how to bring it up, you see. What phraseology to use.’

‘Now, was there a washer to this, I wonder?’ Elizabeth said. ‘Or just the screw.’

‘I certainly never meant to *fire* him for it!’ said Mrs Emerson. ‘I didn’t even know I was going to.’

She dropped to the steps, pulling a flowered handkerchief from her belt with shaky hands. By now the tears had spilled over, but she smiled steadily and kept a tight rein on her voice. ‘Well, I’m being very silly,’ she said.

‘Could you move your feet a minute?’ said Elizabeth. She was patting the ground in search of the screw. Her face was turned slightly away; possibly she had not even noticed the tears. Mrs Emerson straightened her back and blew her nose, silently. *‘All* help is difficult, I suppose,’ she said.

Elizabeth’s hands were square and brown, badly cared for, the nails chopped-looking and the knuckles scraped. But their competence, as they located the screw and fitted it into the chair, was comforting to watch. Mrs Emerson blinked to clear her blurred eyes. ‘Emmeline was another one,’ she said. ‘The maid. Now I’m having to make do with a girl from State Employment, a shiftless sort that chews tobacco. Half the time I can’t even count on her to come. And the house! I’m ashamed to look at it too closely. Oh, it seems I’ve just been left all alone suddenly. No one stayed with me.’ She laughed. ‘I must be hard to get along with,’ she said.

Elizabeth had pulled a red pocketknife from her dungarees. She opened out a screwdriver blade and began tightening the screw. ‘My,’ said Mrs Emerson, making an

effort to lighten her voice. ‘Is that the kind with all the different blades? Corkscrew? Can opener?’

Elizabeth nodded. ‘It’s Swiss,’ she said.

‘Oh, a Swiss Army knife!’ Mrs Emerson blew her nose once more and then folded the handkerchief and blotted her eyes. ‘Matthew wanted one of those for Christmas once,’ she said. ‘My oldest son. He asked for one.’

‘They come in handy,’ said Elizabeth.

‘I’m sure they do.’

But she had given him, instead, a violin and a record player and a complete set of Beethoven’s symphonies. Remembering that made her start crying all over again. ‘I’m sorry about this,’ she said, although Elizabeth still had not looked up at her. ‘It must be bereavement. The aftermath of bereavement. I just lost my husband three months ago. At first, you know, things are very busy and there are always people calling. It’s only later you notice what’s happened. After the people have left again.’

She watched the pocketknife being folded, the chair being set in the garage. ‘Goodness, *that* didn’t take long,’ she said.

Elizabeth returned, dusting off her hands. ‘I’m sorry about your husband,’ she told Mrs Emerson.

‘Oh, well. Thank you.’

Mrs Emerson rose from the steps. All her joints ached, and her knees felt tight and stiff where they had been scraped. They started together up the hill. ‘My friends say it’s often this way,’ she told Elizabeth. ‘The delayed reaction, I mean. But I never expected it *now*, three months after. I thought I had felt bad enough at the time. Sometimes this terrible idea comes to my mind. I think, if he was going to die, then couldn’t he have done it earlier? Before I was all used up and worn out? I could have started some sort of new life, back then. I would have had some hope. Well, *that’s* a stupid thing to say.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Elizabeth said.

It was this girl's silence that made Mrs Emerson rattle on so. Mrs Emerson had a compulsion to fill all silences. In an hour she would be wincing over what she had spilled out to a stranger, but now, flushed with the feeling of finally having someone stay still and listen, she said, 'And I *can't* go for comfort to my children. They're not that kind, not at all. Oh, I always try to look on the bright side, especially when I'm talking to people. That makes me tend to exaggerate a little. But I never fool *myself:* I know I'd have to attend my own funeral before I see them lined up on this veranda again talking the way they used to. They are always moving away from me; I feel like the center of an asterisk. They *work* at moving away. If I waited for my sons to come carry this furniture it would rot first, they never come. They find me difficult.' She climbed the front steps and turned to flash a very bright smile at Elizabeth, who was looking at her blankly. 'Those auto rides,' she said, 'with all of us crammed inside. "There go the Emersons," people would say, and never guess for an instant that behind the glass it was all bickering, arguing, scenes, constant crisis –'

'Oh, well,' Elizabeth said comfortably, 'I reckon *most* families work that way.'

Mrs Emerson paused; her thoughts snagged for a second. Then she said, 'They *live* on crisis. It's the only time they're happy. No, they're never happy. They lead such complicated lives I can't keep up with them any more. All I've seen of my grandchild is one minute little black-and-white photo of a bunch of total strangers, one of them holding the baby. A lady I'd never seen before. Elderly. The last time we were all together was by necessity, for the funeral – and they left the baby with his other grandmother. Two of my boys live right in this area, but do I see them? Well, Matthew, when he can get away. Timothy never. The only one just dying to come is Andrew, and him I'm supposed to discourage because he's a little bit unbalanced. He's not supposed to leave his

psychiatrist. He's not supposed to come home and expose himself to upset. It's unhealthy of him to want to.'

'It sounds,' Elizabeth said unexpectedly, 'as if he's in somebody's *clutches*.'

For a moment Mrs Emerson, who had already opened her mouth to begin a new sentence, had trouble following her. She looked up, startled, at Elizabeth's earnest, scowling face. Then she laughed. 'Oh, my,' she said, and reached for her handkerchief. 'Oh, my, well . . .'

Elizabeth straightened up from the railing she had been leaning against. 'Anyway,' she said, 'I'll just take this last load of furniture down.'

'Oh, will this be the last?' Mrs Emerson said. She had suddenly stopped laughing.

'There's only these two.'

'Wait, don't hurry. Wouldn't you like to rest a minute? Have some milk and cookies? You said you hadn't made an appointment. You could finish up any time.'

'I just did have breakfast,' Elizabeth said.

'Please. Just a glass of milk?'

'Well, all right.'

Mrs Emerson led her into the house, through the ticking hallway toward the kitchen at the rear. 'My, it's so *dark* in here,' she said, although she was used to the darkness herself. As she passed various pieces of furniture – the grandfather clock, a ladderback chair, the chintz-covered armchair in the kitchen, all of them scuffed and worn down around the edges from a lifetime with children – she reached out to give them little pats, as if protecting them from a stranger's eyes. But Elizabeth didn't even glance at them. She seemed totally unobservant. She pulled an enamelled stepstool toward the table and sat down on it, doubling her knees so as to set her feet on the top step. 'I just don't want to hit the O'Donnells at lunch,' she said.

'No, no, you have plenty of time,' said Mrs Emerson.

She poured out a tall glass of milk. Elizabeth said, ‘Aren’t you having any?’

‘Oh. I suppose so.’

Ordinarily she never touched milk. She only kept it for cooking. When she settled herself at the table and took the first sip she had the sudden sense of being back in her mother’s house, where she used to have milk and cookies to ease all the minor tragedies. The taste of milk after tears, washing away the gluey feeling in the back of her throat, was the same then as now; she stared dreamily at a kitchen cabinet, keeping the taste in her memory a long time before taking another sip. Then she set the glass down and said, ‘I hope you don’t think I’m one of those people that gives notice all the time.’

‘Notice?’

‘Firing people.’

‘Why should I think that?’ Elizabeth said.

‘Well, all this talk about Richard. And then Emmeline. But those two have been with me half a lifetime; it’s only lately that all this unpleasantness came up. They took advantage, knowing the state I was in. Oh, I don’t blame them entirely, I know I haven’t been myself. But how could they expect me to be? Ordinarily I’m a marvelous employer, people can’t do enough for me. You can tell by their name that family will have too many children.’

‘Um –’

‘The O’Donnells. Babies and toddlers and little ones in diapers, I’m just sure of it. I believe I know them. Don’t I?’

‘I thought –’

‘They’ll run you off your feet over there.’

Elizabeth finished her milk and set her empty glass down. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. ‘I think you must be offering me a job,’ she said.

‘A job,’ said Mrs Emerson. She sat straighter and placed her palms together. ‘That is something to consider.’

‘Are you asking if I’d like to work for you?’

‘Well, would you?’ Mrs Emerson said.

‘Sure. I’d make a better handyman than babysitter.’

‘Handyman!’ said Mrs Emerson. ‘No, I meant housework. Taking over for Emmeline.’

‘Why not a handyman? It’s what you need most. You already have a maid, you said.’

‘But *gardening*. Painting. Climbing ladders.’

‘I can do that.’

‘Well, I never heard of such a thing.’

‘Why? What’s so strange about it?’ Elizabeth said. She had a habit of rarely bothering to look at people, Mrs Emerson noticed. She concentrated on objects – pulling threads from a seam of her dungarees or untangling the toaster cord or examining the loose knob on the pepper-mill, so that when she did look up there was something startling, almost a flash, in the gray of her eyes. ‘You wouldn’t have to pay me much,’ she said, looking straight at Mrs Emerson. ‘If you let me live in I could get by on next to nothing.’

‘It’s true, it scares me just to think of looking for another colored man,’ said Mrs Emerson. ‘Nowadays you can’t tell *what* to expect.’

‘Well, I don’t know anything about that.’

‘But carrying firewood! Digging compost!’

Elizabeth waited, looking perfectly comfortable, picking leaves off the soles of her moccasins.

‘I do get nervous at night,’ said Mrs Emerson. ‘Not that I am *frightened* or anything. But having someone down the hall, just another human being in case of –’

She fell silent and raised a hand to her forehead. This world expected too many decisions of her. The girl’s good points were obvious (calmness and silence, and the neat twist of her hands mending the chair) but there were bad points, too (no *vivacity*, that was it, and this tendency to drift into whatever offered itself). She sighed. ‘Oh, well,’ she said. ‘It can’t hurt to try you out, I suppose.’

‘Done,’ said Elizabeth, and reached a hand across the table. Mrs Emerson was slow to realize that she was supposed to shake it.

‘Now, I was paying Richard fifty a week,’ she said. ‘But he wasn’t living in. Is forty all right?’

‘Oh, sure,’ said Elizabeth, cheerfully. ‘Anything.’ How would she earn her way through college, talking like that? Then she stood and took her glass to the sink. She said, ‘I guess I’ll get the last of those chairs taken care of.’

‘Fine,’ said Mrs Emerson. She stayed where she was. That was her privilege, now that she was paying. She listened to the front door slamming, the chair legs scraping across the veranda. Then she heard Elizabeth crashing through the woods. She thought of living in the same house with her – such a lanky, awkward, flat-chested girl – and she raised her eyes to the ceiling and asked her husband what she had let herself in for.

2

‘IT’S SIMPLE,’ SAID Elizabeth. ‘That stump is the chopping block. There’s the axe. And there sits the turkey, wondering when you’ll start. What else could you want?’

‘If it’s all that simple why ask *me* to do it?’ the boy said. He was standing beside her in the toolshed doorway, looking at the turkey in its crate. The turkey paced three steps to one side, three steps to the other, stopping occasionally to peer at them through the slats.

‘Look at him, he wants to get it over with,’ Elizabeth said.

‘Couldn’t we call in the butcher?’

The boy was a college senior named Benny Simms – pleasant-faced, beanpole-thin, with a crewcut. He lived two houses down, although his mother was beginning to question that. ‘He lives at *your* place,’ she told Mrs Emerson on the phone. ‘Every weekend home he’s out visiting your handman. Handywoman. What kind of girl is she anyway? Who are her people? Do you know anything *about* her?’ Elizabeth had heard of this call, and other mothers’ calls just like it, from Mrs Emerson, who reported it in a voice that tried to sound amused but came out irritated. ‘This is one problem I never had with Richard,’ she said. ‘I find there are drawbacks that I hadn’t foreseen when I hired you.’ She was still trying to switch Elizabeth over to housekeeping, which was probably why she sounded irritated. She tapped her fingernails on a tabletop. ‘I don’t know, people surprise me more all the time. “Above all else, be *feminine,”* I used to tell my daughters, and here you are in those eternal blue jeans, but every time I look out the window some new boy is helping you rake leaves.’

‘Oh, well, the leaves are nearly gone by now,’ Elizabeth said.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘I’ll be indoors more. They won’t be stopping by so much.’

‘It’s more likely they’ll just start invading my kitchen,’ Mrs Emerson said.

Benny Simms picked up the axe that was leaning against the toolshed. He ran a finger down the blade and whistled. ‘I just did sharpen it,’ Elizabeth told him.

‘I guess you *did*.’

‘Did you know the Emersons have a whetstone wheel? The old-fashioned kind, that works with a foot pedal. I found it in the basement.’

‘Nothing about the Emersons would surprise me at all,’ Benny said.

‘I like things like that. Things without machinery to them. Machinery is something I don’t understand too well.’

‘I would’ve thought you’d know all about it,’ Benny said.

‘No. *Yard* work now, or carpentry, or plumbing – things that you can see reason to right on the surface . . .’

‘Then why can’t you kill the turkey?’ asked Benny.

‘Well.’

He handed her the axe. Elizabeth turned it over several times, studying the glint of the blade very carefully but moving no closer to the turkey. She was wearing what Mrs Emerson called her uniform – moccasins, dungarees, and a white shirt, and a bulky black jacket with a rib-knit waist now that the weather had turned cool. A wind from the east was whipping her hair around her face. She kept brushing it back impatiently without lifting her eyes from the axe. ‘I’m not too certain about that bevel,’ she said. ‘It looks a little bluish. I hope I didn’t go and ruin the tempering.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ said Benny. ‘What’d you take this job for, if you can’t kill turkeys?’

‘Well, how was I to know? Would you expect that to be a part of my job? First I heard of it, in she walked yesterday carrying the crate by the handle. Passed it over to me without even slowing down, walked on through the house peeling off her gloves. Said, “Here you are, Elizabeth, take care of this, will you? Have it ready in time for Thanksgiving dinner.” Tomorrow! I didn’t know what to say. I suspect,’ she said, setting down the axe, ‘that she planned it all on purpose, to turn me to housekeeping.’

‘Most people get their turkeys from the supermarket,’ Benny said.

‘Not her.’

‘All plucked and wrapped in plastic.’

‘Not Mrs Emerson. She won it at a church bazaar.’

‘Oh, is that what you win? I’ve heard of prize turkeys before but I thought they’d have their feathers off.’

‘Nope. You do it all yourself.’

‘Do you know how to pluck them?’

‘Oh, sure,’ said Elizabeth. ‘The feathers and the innards, *that’s* no problem.’

Benny was brushing his crewcut on end, over and over. ‘Innards. Jeepers,’ he said, ‘I’d forgotten them. You’ll have to fish out all those half-made eggs.’

‘I tend to doubt that,’ Elizabeth said. She smiled suddenly and shut the toolshed door, dropping the wooden crossbar into place. ‘Oh, well, I don’t know why I asked you anyway. If you can’t, you can’t.’

‘I’m awfully sorry.’

‘That’s all right.’

They started up the hill toward the front yard – Elizabeth ahead, with her hands deep in her jacket pockets, Benny still brushing up his crewcut as he walked. ‘What I stopped by for,’ he said, ‘was to ask if you wanted to come with me this afternoon.’

‘I’d love to.’

‘I’m going – don’t you want to know where you’d be coming with me *to?*’

‘Where am I coming with you to?’

‘I’m going out to the country for my mother. Picking up some pumpkins for pumpkin pie.’

‘Oh, good,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Maybe I’ll get Mrs Emerson a pumpkin too. Big as a footstool. Drop it in her lap and say, “*Here* you go, take care of this, will you? Have it ready in time for Thanksgiving.”’ She laughed, but Benny didn’t.

‘I don’t know why you stay with that woman,’ he said. ‘Couldn’t you find someone else to work for?’

‘Oh, I Like her.’

‘What for? The whole family’s crazy, everyone knows that.’

Elizabeth had stopped to empty bits of leaves from one moccasin. She shook it out, standing one-legged in the grass. ‘Other people have said so too,’ she said, ‘but I don’t know yet if they’re right. So far I’ve only seen Mrs Emerson and Matthew.’

‘Matthew. Well, he’s okay but *Andrew* is stark raving mad. Wait till you see *him*.’

Elizabeth bent to put her moccasin back on, and they continued toward the street. Squirrels were racing all around them, skimming over the grass and up the skeletons of the trees.

‘When I was little Mrs Emerson used to scare me to death,’ said Benny. ‘Also Andrew, and Timothy a little too but that might have been just because he was Andrew’s twin. I wouldn’t even come in for cookies, not even if Mrs Emerson called me herself with her sweetie-sweet voice. I’d heard stories about them since I was old enough to listen. That Andrew is *violent*. And do you know that Mrs E. went to pieces once because she thought her first baby got mixed up in the hospital?’

‘I hear a lot of people have that thought,’ Elizabeth said.

‘Maybe so, but they don’t go to pieces. And they don’t try and give the babies back to the hospital.’

Elizabeth laughed.

‘I wonder if my mother would care to hire you,’ Benny said.

‘It’s not too likely. Besides, I believe I’d like to stay and meet these people.’

‘When would you do that? Some don’t come home from one year to the next.’

‘Well, one’s coming today, as a matter of fact,’ Elizabeth said. ‘The one here in Baltimore. Timothy. That’s what we’re killing the turkey for.’

‘I could ask my mother if she needs any carpentry done.’

‘Never mind,’ said Elizabeth. She tapped him lightly on the shoulder. ‘Go on, now. I’ll see you this afternoon.’

‘All right. I hope you manage that turkey somehow.’

‘I will.’

She climbed the steps to the veranda, unzipping her jacket as she went. Inside, the house was almost dark, filled with ticking clocks, smelling of burned coffee. The furniture was scarred and badly cared for. ‘Mrs Emerson,’ Elizabeth had once said, ‘would you like me to feed the furniture?’ Mrs Emerson had laughed her tinkling little laugh. ‘Feed it?’ she had said. ‘Feed it what?’ ‘Well, oil it, I mean. It’s drying out, it’s falling to pieces.’ But Mrs Emerson had said not to bother. She had no feeling for wood, that was why – the material that Elizabeth loved best. The hardwood floors were worn dull, black in some places where water had settled in, the grain raised and rough. In a house so solid, built with such care (six fireplaces, slate in the sunporch, a butler’s pantry as big as a dining room, and elegant open inserts like spool-bed headboards above every doorway), Mrs Emerson’s tumble of possessions lay like a film of tattered leaves over good topsoil, their decay proceeding as steadily as Mrs Emerson’s life. Strange improvements had