

House Sitting by Betty

Fred was in a bad mood today. Betty could always tell. It might be the miserable San Francisco weather that made him grumpy. All morning long, torrents of warm spring rain streamed down the windows. *Dripping like Karo syrup over hotcakes*, Betty thought. She hadn't eaten today. Couldn't remember what she ate yesterday. *Did* she eat yesterday?

Her cell phone jangled, interrupting her recollections.

"Is this Miss Betty, with the house sitting?" The caller's accent trilled like birdsong. "I am Graciela Perez, housekeeper for the Mister and Missus Hansen. Their house sitter went to the hospital." She paused while an emergency vehicle siren wailed, then faded away. "The neighbors give me your number. They say you did good house sitting for them last year. Can you come today? It is for one month. Two hundred dollars for every day."

The hubbub of the congested Walmart parking lot *almost* swallowed those last words, but not quite. Inside her ancient Volvo hatchback—crammed with everything she owned—Betty Markham muted her phone and shrieked gleefully, "Hear that, Fred? A job. A place to stay. Two hundred a day! Now, be a sweetheart and get me there."

She unmuted her phone. "Yes, I can come today. What's the address, dear?"

* *

Betty wriggled onto the leather chair behind the hardwood desk in the Hansens' elegant home office. She patted her bobbed gray curls, hoping to tame unruly corkscrews.

Across the room, a flat-faced brown dog lounged in a plush daybed, blinking at her with gumball eyes. Betty frowned. *That dog has a nicer bed than some people.*

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She squinted to read the engravings on framed photos of the smiling couple in snow gear against backdrops of soaring white peaks: Mt. Whitney 2012, Kilimanjaro 2015, Mont Blanc 2018, Denali 2022.

Betty shook her head. *This beautiful home... and they're off climbing mountains.*

The cheerful, chubby housekeeper switched on the desktop printer, made a copy of Betty's driver's license, and handed her a Taxpayer ID Form. Betty fidgeted with the silver-tipped pen before deciding on a business name for the form: House Sitting by Betty.

A car horn blared from outside the kitchen entrance. Graciela shouldered her handbag. "Okay, Miss Betty, I see you next week." Betty followed her into the gourmet kitchen, with the dog scurrying behind. The housekeeper stopped at the kitchen door. "The Hansens are good people. I am with them ten years. Take care of this house, okay?"

Betty nodded. "I will—" she began, before a swell of thankfulness constricted her throat. Finally, she rasped, "I will treat this house as if it were my own."

Graciela stepped outside, eyeing Betty's old Volvo. "Miss Betty, you can park your car in the garage. The remote control is in the office."

"Thank you, Graciela. Please call me Betty, just Betty. If it's all right, I'd like Fred to spend the night there, where I can see him."

The housekeeper's face froze. "Fred? There is a pet, or... someone is in the car?"

Betty struggled not to laugh. "Gracious, no. That's Fred. My faithful old car. We've been through a lot together. He's a good friend."

Graciela studied Betty's face, then looked at the Volvo, then back at Betty. "Miss... ah, Betty," her tone was firm, "I will see you *tomorrow*." She trotted to the white Ford pickup waiting in the driveway and climbed in, glancing back at Betty as they drove away.

Betty didn't need to ask why the housekeeper decided to return sooner than expected. People didn't understand about Fred. She'd grown accustomed to the indulgent nodding, and sometimes snickering. Let them laugh. She didn't want their pity or their charity.

She hovered at the kitchen window until the white truck disappeared down the oak-lined driveway, then sprinted to the refrigerator and threw open the door. She almost cried when she spied the delights within. Minutes later, she gulped a Coke and savored every crumb of an overstuffed turkey sandwich.

Betty tidied the kitchen after her meal, reveling in the pleasingly uncomfortable sensation of a full stomach. She opened the kitchen door to a rush of cool evening air, marveling at the quiet. She inhaled deeply: moist leaves, nearby chimney smoke, the distant bay.

For the first time—in how long?—she felt relaxed, even hopeful.

She gazed at the Volvo, the rear seat barely visible beneath bags of clothing and blankets. “Do you like this place, Fred? I think it's nice.”

No, people didn't understand about Fred. With her husband gone, the house gone, the money gone, even basic needs were often unaffordable. As long as she had Fred to take her where she needed to go, and keep her and her scant possessions off the streets, she was secure in her world. When she counted spare change to buy herself a meal or buy gasoline for Fred, the money would always go to Fred first. That's what you do for a friend, especially when he's the only home you have left.

* *

The next afternoon, as she stacked mail in the office, the familiar craving sensations returned: parched mouth, tingling fingers, restless trembling. Betty grimaced. *My jitters are back.*

Determined to distract herself, she grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator and headed for the TV room.

When she passed the formal living room, she stopped. How did she not notice it yesterday? A Steinway grand piano, resplendent at the far end of the room. Satin ebony finish. Gleaming brass hardware beneath the open lid.

Betty left her Coke on a side table and approached the piano. She slid onto the bench, rubbed her hands briskly to warm them, and began to play. Debussy's Arabesque No.1. A short piece, one of her favorites. After the last tinkling notes, she dropped her hands in her lap and sighed.

"Betty, that was very beautiful." Graciela stood in the doorway, smiling.

Betty jerked, startled. "Oh, Graciela, thank you... I used to teach piano. Years ago." She stroked the keys tenderly. "I've never played an instrument as fine as this one."

The housekeeper nodded, crossing the room. "The Mister Hansen plays. It was his mother's piano." Her eyebrows creased. "Ah, Betty, I was upstairs right now. You didn't sleep in your bed last night? Is everything all right with the room?"

"Yes, of course. Everything's fine." Betty hoped her tone was reassuring. "Will I see you again tomorrow?"

Graciela shook her head. "I will see you next week on Friday." She reached across the keyboard and patted Betty's hand. "Take care of yourself, Betty." Her eyes glinted; not unkindly, Betty thought.

Moments after the housekeeper left the room, Betty's phone vibrated. *Sarah.*

"Mom, is everything okay? The manager at Parkside called. She said you owe two months' rent."

“Honey, everything’s fine. I’m house sitting.”

“Didn’t you quit house sitting after you got the apartment at Parkside? You said you paid off all your bills—”

Betty tensed, biting her lip.

Sarah’s voice dropped. “Are you going online again?”

Betty’s jitters stirred.

“Mom, I can’t help you with money this time. The kids need school clothes.” She exhaled heavily. “Please call the number. *Promise me.*”

Betty winced. The anguish in her daughter’s voice cleaved her heart. “Honey, it’s okay. I’ll call. I promise.”

She flopped on the couch in the TV room and called the number.

A bubbly voice answered: “This is the Gambling Helpline. How can I help—”

She ended the call.

Flickers of Sarah’s pleading voice surfaced. Flickering... fading... gone. Betty’s jitters growled with beastly hunger, consuming her shame and remorse. She tapped the internet button on her phone and typed the Wi-Fi password—the dog’s name: B-U-S-T-E-R. The app launched: Vegas Slots. Cash remained in her account. A new game appeared: “Anchors Aweigh.” *Doug was in the Navy when we met. It’s a sign!*

Her excitement dissolved into an avalanche of melancholy. Their marriage struggled through turbulent times after he squandered their savings on sports betting. But she always felt needed... loved. Then lung cancer took him. Then bankruptcy took everything else. *It’s been three years now.* Her lips quivered. She ached to escape the throbbing memories.

The phone heated the skin of her palm. The screen glowed, whirling with color. Lock in a bet, and swipe. *Ka-ching!* A winner! Lock in, and swipe. *Ka-ching!* Five free plays!

She kicked off her shoes and surrendered to the intoxicating allure: the fevered heat of anticipation after every bet; the warm flush cascading over her body after every win; the bitter aftertaste of every loss.

As long as her luck held out, she would not sleep tonight.

She hoped Fred wouldn't miss her too much.

* *

Betty lurched off the couch, kicking aside the crushed Coke cans littering the floor. The money was gone. She kneaded her hands. *Hold on until payday, then you can go home to Parkside. Now, you need to sleep.*

Bleary-eyed, she trudged up the sweeping staircase in the dark, took a wrong turn, and opened the door to a room she hadn't toured with Graciela. The room shimmered in moonlight streaming through bay windows. Intrigued, she stepped inside.

A stone fireplace. A canopied four-poster bed. Two bathrooms. A walk-in closet furnished with a vintage-style fainting couch. Unable to resist, Betty stretched out on the silky golden fabric.

Inches above her head, a wall mirror wobbled precariously. She gripped the frame... and yelped as the mirror swung out, revealing a hidden wall safe. Betty gawked, then smirked. *Not a great hiding place.* She sighed wearily, closed the mirror, and settled back onto the couch, her eyelids heavy, head drooping, arms numb.

* *

Shrill ringing jolted her awake. The house phone. Blinking against the bright morning light, she stumbled downstairs to the speakerphone in the kitchen and keyed in the voicemail code.

“This is Evelyn Patel, the Hansens’ attorney,” the message began. “I’m calling with difficult news. An avalanche struck the expedition in Nepal. The Hansens did not survive.”

Betty swayed, one hand over her mouth.

“An associate will arrive today to reset the security alarm and convey the pet to a kennel. Please vacate the home today and remit an invoice for your services—”

Betty hugged her arms, massaging up and down.

Vacate today? Where will I go? I don’t have any money.

Minutes later, she stood inside the walk-in closet, scrutinizing the keypad on the safe. She tried B-U-S-T-E-R, the voicemail code, the house alarm code. None worked.

Defeated, fighting tears, she shuffled from the closet into the bedroom. A shiny object on the fireplace mantel caught her eye: a silver jar embossed with tiny pawprints, inscribed “Cookie.” An urn. The ashes of a beloved pet. *Could it be so simple?* She returned to the closet and keyed: C-O-O-K-I-E. The safe popped open. Jewelry glittered in drawers cushioned with white velvet.

She froze, churning with guilt and fear. Then—her mind made up—she opened the safe wide.

Betty hurried downstairs, dragging her duffel bag. Inside the bag, a pink sock concealed diamond earrings and a Rolex watch. *I’ll visit the nice folks at the Jewelry Exchange. Maybe they’ll still have my wedding ring.*

She stopped at the office, waking Buster from a nap on his chaise. The dog yipped expectantly. Betty scratched his ears. “You’re going to a kennel. I’m sorry, buddy.” Spotting the manila folder where Graciela left it on the desk, she removed her driver’s license copy and tax form, stuffed the pages into her sweater pocket, and left the house.

As she coaxed the sputtering Volvo toward the main road, Betty mused dreamily about her tiny furnished apartment at Parkside. “Yunno, Fred, it will be so good to be home.”

* *

Ten days later, a black Mercedes sedan eased along the driveway to the Hansen home and parked outside the front entrance. The driver turned to speak to the lone passenger: a slender woman, her left leg encased in a heavy brace. “Let’s get you inside so you can rest that leg.” Her face softened with compassion. “George was a treasured client and a good friend. If there is anything the firm can do for you, please call.”

Melanie Hansen gazed at the house, eyes glistening. “Thank you, Evelyn.” She sighed. “You know, in the middle of... everything... all I kept thinking was: It will be so good to be home.”

* *

Betty shifted uneasily on the cushions of the pearl-white couch in the formal living room, tapping her foot on the eggshell-white carpet. She balanced the delicate teacup in both hands, terrified of spilling a drop of Oolong on the spotless surroundings. Buster snored near her feet, his ears twitching. Betty’s focus darted around the room, then returned to the woman seated in the creamy-white armchair opposite the couch.

Melanie winced, adjusting her braced leg on the armchair’s footstool. She sipped from her cup, then murmured, “I never imagined I’d come home without George.” She shook her

head. “I’m sorry about that first phone call from Evelyn, asking you to leave. Conditions on the mountain were... awful, chaotic. It was another woman they found, poor thing.” Her eyes searched Betty’s face. “I’d like you to answer one question. Why did you turn around and come back?”

Betty’s foot stopped tapping.

Melanie placed her teacup on the tray table near her chair. “The security cameras at the front driveway recorded you leaving. But you turned your car around before you reached the road. Before the attorney arrived to tell you I’d be coming home.” She leaned forward. “When the safe is opened, the camera in the bedroom closet activates. The camera recorded everything. So, why did you come back that day? Why did you return my jewelry to the safe?”

“Because I’m not a thief.” Betty’s voice wobbled, but the words flowed out in a rush. “I was scared. I had nowhere to go. I needed money. But I... I’m not a thief.” *This is it*, she thought, *I’m going to jail*.

Melanie’s face was unreadable. “I asked Evelyn’s firm to look into your background. I spoke to your daughter. She told me how hard it’s been for you since your husband’s death. And earlier, with his gambling, the bankruptcy. Is he the reason you started gambling?”

Betty didn’t answer. Her face flushed. *My Doug is none of your business*. Her stomach twisted with the mortifying realization: *This woman talked to Sarah. How could she do that?*

Melanie’s expression warmed. “Let me tell you something about me, Betty. All this,”—her hand gestured around the room—“is George’s legacy, not mine. We met late in life. He was an adventurer. So we set out together to live his dreams.” Her voice quavered. “Now I’m alone in the house he built before he met me.”

Betty wondered where all this talk was leading. *Is she going to call the police or not?*

“Betty, you and I have something in common. We’re both survivors. I know George would want me to go on, to find happiness again. Life has given me a second chance. I’d like to offer you another chance, too.”

Betty’s thoughts swirled; the effect was dizzying.

“I’m leaving soon, to stay with my sister on the east coast. I don’t know when I’ll be back. There are just too many memories here.” Melanie exhaled a shuddering breath, then smiled softly.

“Betty, I’d like you to stay on. I know you’re not a thief. You made a mistake, and you made it right. I believe I can trust you to take care of this house. If you agree to stay, we’ll talk about a salary and benefits.

“There is one condition.” Her tone deepened. “You must complete an addiction treatment program. There are excellent outpatient programs within driving distance. I would receive reports on your progress.”

Betty’s hands began to tremble. *I don’t want this rich woman’s pity. Or her charity.* Then... her fingers slipped, the cup tipped, and tea splashed onto the eggshell carpet. Betty recoiled in dismay at the dark stain expanding at her feet. She grabbed a handful of napkins from the tray table, dropped to her knees, and began blotting the carpet frantically. Buster, startled from sleep, yelped in alarm.

Melanie reached out and touched Betty’s arm gently. “Betty, it’s fine. Please stop, it’s not necessary.”

Betty clutched the soggy napkins in her fist and rose shakily to her feet. “I’m sorry about the rug. I think I’ll—” She looked around the elegantly furnished room, at the magnificent grand

piano, at the view of the trees through the bay window overlooking the front drive. “I’ll go upstairs and get my bag now. I appreciate your offer... I just don’t think it’s right for me.”

She turned and headed for the stairs.

Melanie called after her: “Betty, I hope I didn’t offend you. I wish you’d reconsider.” She clutched Buster’s collar as the dog whimpered and struggled to follow Betty from the room.

Ten minutes later, Betty steered the creaky Volvo down the curving driveway. She glanced at the reflection of the house in the rearview mirror: Melanie and Graciela standing at the bay window, watching her departure. Tightening her grip on the wheel, she whispered, “I’m scared, Fred.”

She jolted at the sound of her phone’s ringtone. A familiar number on the screen: Graciela calling. Betty stopped the car; the Volvo’s red brake lights reflected in the smooth glass of the bay window.

“Hello, Betty. The Missus Hansen wants to tell you the garage is *heated*. She says Fred will be comfortable there when the weather is cold.”

Betty dabbed at her wet eyes and muted the phone. “What do you think, Fred? It does get cold at night.”

The reflection of the Volvo’s tail lights in the bay window changed from bright red to brilliant white, as the car executed a perfect three-point turn and headed back up the driveway toward the house.
