

The Upper Floor · Elizabeth Roget

THE UPPER FLOOR, ignored, inexistent, lies above my head in the dusty quiet of disuse. At the rent I am paying for the cottage, Mrs. Hardy told me, I could not expect them to clean it. And I don't need an inch beyond the downstairs.

The downstairs could not be better. The sort of parlor to the left of the entry has become my studio, to work and sleep in. The rented piano I ordered from Paterson is only an old upright, but it is a good one. There is a bedcouch, and a chest of drawers for the washable, foldable things that are all I wear here. My city clothes hang out of sight in the closet under the stairs, in a plastic bag that keeps them separate from the broom and mop. The kitchen, on the other side of the entry, is living space, too—a proper kitchen, as big as the parlor, and the bathroom is built off it. And then there's all outdoors—woods and fields and not another house in sight. Enough space, certainly, for one person to live in, for two months that I hate to think will end. After my initial, renter's, look, the upper floor has just been the steep flight of stairs that cuts the downstairs in two.

I bragged, however, and mentioned its existence to Mary when I wrote. And at first she hinted—said things like, “You lucky dog,” and “If we had your luck,” which I can ignore, because I scrimped for a year to take the summer off, and this cottage, in a remote corner of New Jersey, did not turn up of its own accord. The Hardys let me have it cheap; evidently, they like renting to a single girl—a *teacher*—with a declared purpose but without a car or pets. They can't worry about pets, there is nothing to wreck in the cottage. But when they found I had none, in their peculiar country style they used that as a reason for coming down with the rent. It pleases them that, having no car, I am dependent upon them, that in a way they have to keep an eye on me. Aside from the storekeepers in the village, where I shop with Mrs. Hardy, they are the only people I see, and then only when I go to the farm for milk, butter, eggs, or to have washing done.

In New York, in the music school where I teach, I am broken to schedules, methods, meetings, superiors, the vagaries of students, the anxieties of parents. Even in the evening, pupils come to my apartment. I see people all the time. And there are my neighbors, whom I don't see but can never forget—they hear me, I hear them. I hear the cat run across the floor in the apartment above mine.

Being here went to my head, at first. I would get up in the night to send chords crashing. I thought the pale dawn was the moment to try out a new passage. I couldn't bear to cook. I lived on cold cuts, cheese, eggs, fruit, and the white, factory-baked bread, tasting like soft cardboard, that is the only kind sold in the village (or that people like, for that matter—the Hardys

would eat no other). Since then, my days have found their simple pattern—with, in the center, what I came for: practice and study.

Last week, Mary gave up on hinting. “Can’t you let us use that upper floor for a weekend?” she wrote. “We won’t be an expense to you. We’ll pay for our keep. How can you *bear* to think of us stuck in the city like this?” I have known Mary since the year one—that is, since college, where we both hung around the music department. I went on to more music. Mary now works for a musical booking agency. That was how she met Hugo, a couple of years ago. I am not sure I like Hugo. Be that as it may, I went to the farm and called Mary, and they are coming out this weekend. Now that it’s decided, it seems like a big, exciting event. I guess I’m ready to talk to my kind again.

Friday morning, I climb those stairs to the upper floor: two bedrooms, one north, one south. From the tiny landing between them, I peer into each in turn. The south room has twin beds. Mary and Hugo sleep in twin beds at home. The south room it will be.

I climb on a chair to take down the curtains. I will not wash them—the ones downstairs did not, for heaven’s sake, have ruffles. With the unpopulated, green loveliness outside, who needs curtains? At arm’s length, I carry the pile of grimy marquissette downstairs and shove it into a shopping bag. I examine my hands, black as though they had handled coal. Ten years ago, when I was eighteen and overpraised, I never doubted that, because of the art in them, my hands would in time be insured. All I can do is wash them and, still uninsured, rub lotion into them. I tie a cloth over my head, tuck a corner of a rag into the top of my shorts, pull on rubber gloves.

With a bucket of warm suds hanging at the end of one arm and a broom and dustpan clasped in the other hand, I work my way upstairs again, banging right and left. I sweep down the walls, sprinkling the cracked linoleum with a confetti of wallpaper. I sweep the floor. I strip off the bedcovers and, as if it were in celebration of the fact that this can be done here, throw them out the window. With the rag and the suds, I wash the black dust off the furniture and woodwork. The furniture is puzzling, as in so many old country places—the beds of painted iron and unmatched, the chest of drawers with a marble top, the wardrobe a fine old piece. I fetch up a fresh bucketful of suds and mop the floor.

The sheets have been freshly laundered by Mrs. Hardy (as a favor: “I may be able to accommodate you,” she said, about doing my wash; and then charged me just about double what my Chinese laundryman does in the city). But these sheets have not been dried in a hot metal drum—Mrs. H. hangs her wash on a line in the sun. Before spreading them on the beds, I hold them to my face. To have sheets smell like that might be reason enough for living in the country.

Mrs. H. gave me a few roses when I went for my milk this morning. Arranged in a jam jar on the marble-topped chest, they should make up for the absence of curtains and bedspread.

To counteract the grasping of handles and rags, I flutter my fingers, curl them into near-fists, spread them. My housework has always been slow-motion, and the morning has gone. After lunch, Mrs. H. will pick me up for weekend shopping. She won't hear of my paying her anything for these lifts "into town." She is going anyway, she says.

A shopping list needs making out. A good hunk of meat, if I can find an affordable cut. I don't have guests every day. Beer. Things for salads. What else?

Trips made specially for me, and that I pay for, are distinctly a favor. I am not to imagine, Mrs. H. seems to imply with anything she does for a fee, that she needs this job. It is under such an arrangement that she takes me to meet the bus Saturday morning. As I stand expectant in front of the village drugstore, I find it impossible to believe, after three weeks alone, that the bus will show up at all, and, when it does, that it contains anyone I know.

It does that too, however. Mary and Hugo get off, the only passengers for this stop.

"Hello, hello!" I whoop, and hug Mary, surprising myself on both counts. We were roommates our last year at college, but ours is not a hugging relationship. Hugo stands by, carrying two small grips. He does not, as he would have done when he was newly arrived from Germany, hurriedly set them down to offer his hand. "Hello, Cheen," he says, amiably. His eyes swiftly take in my legs.

"You look cool," Mary remarks, glancing at the high-perched edge of my shorts.

"Well, it's hot." I lead them to where Mrs. H. sits in her old blue Chevrolet sedan, and introduce them. They dispose themselves in the back seat with their bags. I sit sideways in front, my chin on my fist on the back of the seat. As we drive off, Mary goes into the agonies of their early rising, the jangling alarm clock, the breakfastless exit from the apartment, the weekend crowds at the Port Authority Terminal.

"If you want to witness a demonstration of democracy," Hugo puts in, "go to the autobus station. You will see everyvun dere, mixed togeder, but more black den odder."

I hardly hear his words for his accent, a forgotten thing leaping out at me. Country people, I have noticed, no matter how undereducated (and that includes the Hardys), label ignorant any person with a foreign accent. I feel impelled to establish Hugo's status. "I see you didn't bring your violin," I say, not exactly dexterous.

He looks at me astounded. "My Got! My violin? Do you think the weekend is not enough to get away from the damn fiddle?"

I give him a wink, and tell Mrs. H.: "Mr. Eckert plays the violin in the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra." This is true. If it means anything to her, however, she doesn't show it.

Our dirt road runs between shrubbery unkempt and dry with summer.

"Dust, dust," says Hugo.

"And there is Mrs. Hardy's farm," I point out. "You won't mind if I take my friends around the farm some time today or tomorrow, will you, Mrs. Hardy?"

"Sure. Suit yourself." She turns into the cottage plot.

"How quaint! How rustic!" Mary cries.

We climb out. I check with Mrs. H. about the next day, when she is to take my guests to the return bus. She drives off.

Hugo is standing on the edge of the porch, apparently in a dudgeon. "Cheen! Cheen!" he cries (my name is Jean). "It is impossible not to speak. All the fussmaking for the purpose to make an impression on a simple farm woman with not two ideas in her cranium. Even me you pull in. My violin! It is out of place. She is a plain woman."

I go past him into the house. As they follow me with their bags, I lead the way upstairs.

"Hugo is insufferable before he's had his breakfast," Mary explains in my wake. She cries out with delight over their room. "All that space! If I didn't have my job, we could move in on you!"

Hugo walks around, nodding, looking out of the windows, through which comes the burble of the rocky creek. "It is beautiful, that rushing," he says.

I turn this over in my mind, trying to match it to my mostly Schubert-derived German. "*Das Rauschen*," I conclude, not looking at him. But I am grateful—one is grateful when Hugo admires something. And so am reconciled to going downstairs and scrambling fresh farm eggs for him.

I waited for breakfast myself, and we are all starving. I am starved for talk, too, and can't help chattering—questioning them about the people we know, the world we have in common, telling them about hayings, calf-bornings, local population. At this moment, even Hugo feels like "my people." Even though he has come down wearing only sandals and madras shorts.

"Hugo likes to come to breakfast half undressed," Mary explains.

It is totally undressed he looks as he sits at the kitchen table. He is thirty-two, and has no doubt for years been conscious of his fine, Teutonic manhood, taken pride in his musculature. He is not a bad-looking man.

They look into the studio.

"An upright piano?" Hugo exclaims. "But that is not good for practice! It has not the same action—" the way he pronounces it, *ahk*, followed by

the full bushiness of the *shun*, doubles the weight of the word “—like a grandpiano. You are half wasting your time.”

“Does he need another breakfast?” I ask his wife. “A grand piano would have crowded me out of the room, besides going through the floor. This is an excellent Kranich and Bach. Even the tuner liked it. What has the action got to do with finding what’s in a composition, and getting it by heart? Two weeks would be enough to adapt to a grand, later, and I’ll have two months after I get back.”

Hugo walks past me into the room. He can’t stand any mention of the recital I am preparing for. He has implied that it is presumptuous of me to give a recital. I am an American and a woman. He, a man and a European—both of which invest him with greater authority in matters cultural, especially musical—would not think of giving a recital.

Mary, who went upstairs, comes down again with bills in her hand.

“Let’s settle this right now,” she says. “It’s agreed that we’ll pay for our keep. Then we won’t need to have qualms about coming again.”

I feel wary. And, in an obscure way, cheated.

“We’d spend about this much in the city these two days, eating at home,” Mary says, holding out twelve dollars.

“Guess I can’t be proud.” I try to think. “But you know you’ll still have to pay Mrs. Hardy four dollars for the two trips.”

“That’s right, I hadn’t thought about that.” Mary brings her hand back to a reflective position near her waist.

“You are both *ahb-soord*,” Hugo remarks. “What has to do the payment to the farm woman for the driving with the cost to Cheen for the food? One is one thing, the other is another thing. Take the money, Cheen, less than that it will not cost.”

My thinking suddenly comes clear. I shake my head. “No. I never said I agreed to that. You’ll just have to swallow your pride and be my guests.” I give them what I hope is an engaging grin and turn to the door, while Mary follows, protesting loudly:

“But we *are* your guests! It has *nothing* to do with pride, how did you get that notion? *Your* pride, you mean. We practically invited ourselves, and I *know* you’re living on a shoestring. How can we feel free—”

She is right on all counts, and I had really intended to let them pay. I try to explain my position, to myself, too. “Well, letting guests pay seems to spoil the fun.”

“I never knew,” Mary says on a note of exasperation, “that you were so—so *Chinese*.”

“I didn’t either,” I concede gracefully. And I feel much better now, as we spread blankets on the grass. Too bad Mary seems less so. Hugo does not seem affected either way.

“Tell me one thing,” he says, as soon as we have settled down. “How do you like this, all the time to be alone?”

"Yes!" Mary cries. "Don't you get scared?"

"That is not what—" Hugo puts in.

"No," I say, "but Mary has a point." The memory of it mutes my voice. "I was—well, the first night was pure terror."

Mary sits up slowly to stare at me. "How?"

"I don't know. The noises. It was full of noises. There's an animal living under the house. I know now it's a groundhog, but it sounded like something enormous, like a bear, under the floor, right under my bed. And animals walked around outside, deer, I guess. And the creek sounded twice as loud, and there was a wind, and the trees rustled and swished, and the house seemed to be *whispering*."

"God! I would have died!" Mary screams.

"Don't think I didn't. And there was something else." I laugh a trifle wildly. "Mice ran over my bed. Over my *pillow*."

"No! Oh, no! I wouldn't have stayed another minute!"

"Well, it was the middle of the night, outside. And when morning came everything was sunny and peaceful. I talked to the Hardys and they got rid of the mice for me. And as for the rest, why, I've learned that all kinds of beasts and birds come alive at night here. Now I sleep and let live."

After a moment of respectful silence, I hear Hugo say, "You have courage." Something in his voice causes me quickly, because of Mary, to mention practical considerations.

"Being alone is marvelously convenient for my work, of course. Think of what it means to be able to repeat, and repeat, and repeat, at any hour, and not bother a soul."

"You can have the same thing," Hugo says sourly, "in a professional studio it is possible to rent in New York. The soundproof studio."

"Not at any hour. You don't live in it." I will not tell him about the waking in the night with a sudden understanding of a certain passage and, the light on or off, depending on the moon, trying it out within those four walls that I share with no one.

"So," he says. "You work."

"Why, sure. That's what I'm here for."

"What is it that you are practicing?"

I look at him uncertainly. "Why—for my recital." He brought it up himself. He is getting ready with advice.

"You have made up the program?"

"Why yes, mostly."

"What is it that you are planning?" He makes me furious, and yet I want to laugh. He is ruining his schoolmasterish tone with wheedling inflections.

"Why, nothing terribly original. I'll begin with Scarlatti and end with Poulenc, most likely."

"Poulenc." Evidently, he doesn't quite approve of Poulenc. "And in the middle?"

I will not put my program into his hands to be torn apart, leaving me hemmed around by doubts. As I lie on my back, I smile at the clouds. "Ah, the middle—"

"Yess—"

I continue to smile dreamily at the clouds.

"You are not telling me."

"*Hugo*," Mary says from where she lies, supine again, eyes closed, her face a smooth, blank mask surrendered to the sun.

Thus given support, I roll over on my stomach and lean on my elbows. "My music is on the piano and in the piano bench. You're welcome to look at it, Hugo. I just don't want to discuss it."

He looks amused. "So. You know what you want to do. And you repeat, and repeat, and repeat—" his gutturals grind down as, with mock deference, he echoes what I said, "—until you—ah—*possess* each piece perfectly."

"No," I say, angry. "That's just the technical part, you know it very well." Why doesn't he sleep, like his wife? Mary, her last effort made, has fallen into light, tremulous snoring. But he is sitting with his arms around his manly knees and there is no getting away from him. What he said, however, triggers something, and, after a moment, out of my unconscious surfaces my heart's desire. Not really meaning it for him, I murmur: "The music should possess *me*."

I have almost forgotten him, except for the fact that someone is listening who cannot fail to understand what I am saying. And so I go on to formulate, painfully, what I never formulated before. "I mean, that is what I'd like, what I thought I'd get to." It is the bitter water of my life that I have not. "But it has never happened. I am still plugging away, playing as best I can the music as I best understand it." My elbows slide outward and my face, turned away from him, lies on the back of my hands.

"But then I do not understand why—" his voice, hushed no doubt in deference to Mary's sleep, is intimate, almost kind, "why then you want to perform, to give a concert. If you are not sure, how do you expect to what you call it, launch yourself?"

He has stopped needling me, and I am too preoccupied to connect the phenomenon with my having as good as confessed myself a failure. I push myself up and turn on my back again. With Mary asleep, an amazingly solid bar to expression has been removed. Hugo, apparently neutralized, is listening, and in a moment I shall have the whole situation clear to myself. I, too, drop my voice. "I am not expecting to launch myself at all, although critics will be there—second- or third-string critics. The best I can hope for is that they'll say things like good musicianship and perhaps perceptiveness and if I've worked hard perhaps technical brilliance. Proficiency, more likely. And the audience will consist of my friends and their friends, and my pupils and their families, and the school and so on. I know all that. I also

know it will raise my standing in the school, but that is incidental. But I *have* trained and studied to be a concert pianist, and I'm only twenty-eight, and still presentable."

He gives me a startled look. "*Very* presentable," he whispers.

At the moment, I hardly hear him. "But that is incidental, too. What I want, mainly, is once more to put what music I have to the test, to bring it as far as is in me and, perhaps, to its—well, resolution by performing it there, in public, and perhaps, just perhaps, at least *something* will take hold, will take possession of me."

"Possession of you," he repeats, as though out of his too-blue eyes.

I leap to my feet. "I must go fix lunch."

He is up the next second. "May I help?" The intimacy is dreadful.

"No. No." My whisper is so emphatic that Mary's little snore is suspended for an instant. "I'll call you when it's ready. We'll eat out here."

We take a walk in the afternoon, Hugo cleaving to his wife's side as though he had been unfaithful to her. Then they sleep again on the grass, while I cook dinner. Mary does the dishes afterwards. After those hours of rest, they show no inclination to go to bed. We sit in the studio after the darkness brings out mosquitoes and gnats. I found in the house an old collection of American folksongs, foxed and dog-eared and minus its binding, which Hugo is now entranced with. He tries the tunes on the piano, singing the words, in an unexpected tenor, so they all sound like German. It is past midnight when they go upstairs. As Hugo follows his wife through the door, he lays, behind her back, a quick, grasping hand on my shoulder. A hand that has nervous desire seeping through its fingertips. I stare after him in amazement. Because I unbosomed myself? But it's stupid, I think, there's Mary. Funny, in one way or another he always tries to get some kind of dominance over me—the kind of thing he doesn't have over Mary. But it is not unpleasant, to know that he is aware of me as a woman. My marriage ended a year and a half ago, and no affair has come my way since. Not that I want one with Hugo, Lord knows.

I carry out and empty ashtrays. Because of the outsiders in the house, I close the door of the room before getting into bed. When I finally seek the sleep I fended off all the evening, I am pursued by Hugo's voice doing peculiar things with "The Wreck of the Old Number Nine."

What wakes me I don't know. I didn't hear the door, and he hasn't touched me yet. It seems more like a half-waking, into an awareness of something, a couple of inches from my face, that my skin wants as a child's mouth wants candy. The room is far from dark; at the open windows the blinds are up on a white moonlight. I know who it is when a finger comes into contact with my face and the back of it strokes my cheek. Hugo is sitting on a chair, right up against my couch, his head bending close—I see his hair, the line of his nose, straight with a very slight swell half-way

down. I lie open-eyed—he must see it, that I am open-eyed—simply waiting for what must now happen. The finger becomes a hand, I feel lips light at first, a cheek that is all the more grateful to mine because it suggests the need of a shave. Every one of his moves lags just a little behind my wanting, so that my mind is occupied with nothing else. The only thought that takes form through the enclosed haze of my senses is that *these* hands—*his*—ought to be insured. By the time he shakes off his Japanese robe, I have put out my own hands to the torso I remember from the morning. Neither of us says a word.

Sunshine, hot, golden, fills the room. For a moment, I don't know where I am—I have never, here in the country, slept this late. Or that deep. On the other side of the wall against which I lie, light steps are mounting the stairs. Mary. *Mary*. Mentally, I sit up. Physically, I only open my eyes and close them again. Mary. I try to be appalled and am not. I feel peaceful and detached. There is no time, anyway, to dwell upon anything. What happened last night was no dream, and I must be up and put myself and my bed to rights before Mary comes knocking at the door, very likely to walk right in. I wrap a robe around me, pull the covers over the couch, and hurry to the shower noisily, so that the two upstairs may hear me and wait. I am dressed and have coffee percolating when Mary comes down, fully put together for the day. Then Hugo appears, bound for the bathroom and carrying a variety of articles. I am ready for him.

“Good morning, Hugo,” I say in an everyday voice. He charges through without answering.

Mary gives a little snort. “That’s Hugo before breakfast.” We don’t wait for him.

He comes out fifteen minutes later, showered, shaved, powdered, wearing slacks and a shirt. Rubbing his hands in token of well-being and high spirits, he bows to us jovially, without looking at anyone. Mary pours a cup of coffee and places it before him.

“I’ve explained to Jean that you’re a bit cranky before you’ve had your coffee.”

“What has the coffee to do with it? In no way am I cranky. I do not exist, in particular not for the ladies, before I am presentable.” I give a passing thought to yesterday morning. True, he was shaved. After the first moment, I find I can talk to him, even look at him, without difficulty, and Mary’s being there makes it easier—we are functioning on her level, not on ours. But what is ours? Last night’s man and this one are not the same, although they overlap in confusing visible ways. At one moment, I am tempted to look at his hands. Checking, as it were. I do not, however. I am confused enough.

Leaving the dishes in the sink, we set out for a walk, beginning with the farm. "The Hardys go to church," I explain. "I don't know how they would feel about our nosing around while they are away."

"I notice that Cheen still has the worry about the farm woman," Hugo remarks. He takes from me the two milk bottles I am carrying.

"He's nice that way," Mary says.

"What way?" I ask, unthinking.

"Carrying things. He always carries one's things."

Did I ever go around explaining Robert to people? I try to remember. If I did, small wonder. It is reassuring to know that Mary and I are not at all alike.

The farm is pleasant, old-fashioned, with wide-spreading trees around the house. Mrs. H., in a flowered Sunday dress, her hair set, powder and lipstick on, displays social graces that she does not bother with on weekdays. Not only does she smile all around, but when I am about to skip the barn, empty of cows at this time of day, she calls out: "Wouldn't your friends like to see the new calf, now, Miss Markham?" and then again: "There's a new batch of chicks hatched. Around to the back of the coops." On our return, we stop once more at her kitchen door to pick up my milk, which we intend to drop off at the cottage.

At this point, Hugo hands her a dollar bill. I stand petrified.

Smiling, her eyelids fluttering with uncertainty, Mrs. Hardy turns the bill around. "That ain't for the *milk*, now?"

"No, no," says Hugo, his palm upraised. "For you."

"Why, thank you!" She appears charmed. "And you will be wanting me with the car about five-thirty tonight."

We confirm this, say good-bye, and walk to the road in silence. Then Mary remarks: "It's your business if you want to give the woman a dollar, but I don't see why you didn't wait until tonight, when you'll have to give her four. Then you could just have made it five. Have you got four ones? I haven't."

"If I would give it tonight," Hugo says, in the tone of a kindly teacher, "Cheen would not see it. It is important that Cheen should see the farm wife putting out her hand for the tip."

"She did not put out her hand! You know she didn't. You had to explain what it was for! Okay, I was shocked. I'm amazed she accepted. But she by no means expected it or asked for it!"

"But she was glad for it. I want only to make the point: she is not a woman from the same class as you, and to worry about her is not necessary."

I feel like hitting him. "What has worrying about someone got to do with their class?" I want to tell him how we feel about class in America. But that exchange with Mrs. H. has wakened an echo. She reacted exactly the way he expected her to. The way I did last night; and questions about *that* have

been growing and waving about in my head. How did he dare? How did he know I would not make some commotion that might wake Mary—even scream? It is intolerable. A while ago, in our straggling progress through the farm, as he followed me through a rickety turnstile, he lightly ran his fingers over my forearm. Reminding my flesh of his flesh. Good, oh good, I think now, that just then Mary, ahead of me, turned to say something, and I was not betrayed into letting him see that my flesh did, indeed, remember.

As we come abreast of the cottage, I take the bottle from Hugo. “Look, dear children—” I say children on purpose “—don’t wait for me. I’ve been to the top of the hill, and I can go any time. I have scads to do. Follow the road and take the first path to the right after the road sign. I’ll plan for a picnic on the grass around two. Have a nice walk!” Ignoring their protest, I make for the house. At the door, I glance after them, going up the road. They are walking smartly in step. Is it possible that he makes love to her the way he did to me?

They must not come again. He must not come again. As I put the house to rights, set potatoes to boil, chop vegetables, my mind churns on and on around moves diplomatic and undiplomatic, possibilities, consequences. Because of Mary, I tell myself. Because of Mary. But what I run up against, mostly, is those two Hugos that will not be made into one, either to be heartily disliked or—here, because of Mary, I stop, and settle for heartily disliking. But they must not come again.

On her way back from church, Mrs. Hardy brings me the *Sunday Times*, as usual, and after lunch we fall upon it like horses finding their familiar oats. Then, of course, sleep overtakes us over our respective sections, and quite a bit of time goes by. It is not until after Mary and Hugo have rushed upstairs to change and pack, and are standing with their bags on the porch, waiting for Mrs. H., that Mary delivers her last, solemn appeal.

“Hugo and I discussed this on our walk this morning, Jean. He agrees with me that unless you let us pay our way, we can’t come again. We know your budget does not include guests. Just tell us—what is it to be? Your decision, I mean.”

It is most dignified and, from their standpoint, well put. I recognize it, even in what it takes for granted now, as emanating, not from speaker Mary, but from Hugo, standing a little back of her and looking intently at his feet.

Here is my chance, I guess. I take it on an unplanned tack, much closer to me. Mary and I have never worn gloves, particularly, in our dealings with each other.

“To tell you the truth, Mary, that is not the real point. Of course you’re right about my budget, but the main question is time. It’s no end of fun

having you here, I—I've just loved it, but, well, I came here to work, and I haven't touched the piano in three days."

At this, Hugo's head snaps back. Mary cries indignantly: "We were only here *two* days!" They're funny, but I don't smile.

And I may as well stay the course. "Yes, I know. But, well—I spent all of Friday making the room upstairs fit to live in. And then shopping. And n—" I stop before saying "now," but, without meaning to, have made some motion—of eyes or head, I don't know which—toward the kitchen.

"Jean, I swear, I meant to wash those dishes. But there just isn't *time*!" She makes small, frantic gestures toward their clothes, their baggage, and Mrs. H.'s Chevrolet, turning into the lot.

"I know. Of course. But you can see—"

She nods. He nods. Thanks, farewells, Mary keeping up the apologies. Hugo, still not looking at me, gives me a bone-crushing handclasp. I watch them go, and wave as they disappear.

I walk back to the house slowly. I pause in the quiet to listen to birds in a tree, the creek in back, but I don't know what I am thinking. I find twelve dollars, evidently cast down in a hurry, in the nearest porch chair. Mary? Hugo? The fact is, they're right, I need the money. It seems as though Mary has had her way but, even so, they cannot invite themselves again. Which doesn't seem to clear anything up.

I'll do those dishes tomorrow. I sit down at the piano, kneading my hands to loosen them. The right one still feels that handclasp. The faint soreness across the knuckles diminishes as I rub them. What did he mean by that? I don't know. What I do know is that this room has taken on life, importance. Meaning? Perhaps not quite. But it has a different feel.

I begin to play Schubert's Impromptu in F minor—part of my program, which Hugo knows nothing about.

I might ask them out once more before the end of summer. If I do, I can bolt this door. But there's no telling, I may not.