

Two Stories · *Alyce Ingram*

TEDDY

PEOPLE MIGHT WONDER why an older unmarried woman like myself (I hate the word spinster—it sounds like smelly petticoats), might wonder why someone in my position would keep a dogeared teddybear around the house when I don't have any grandchildren coming to play but the truth of the matter is I keep thinking that young Mrs. Tinker might pop up some day to reclaim him and I wouldn't want her to take me to Small Claims Court upon learning I gave him to the Salvation Army after I promised her the morning she left in a taxi three years ago that I'd mind him until she got back from taking care of some very important business from which she has not yet returned. Not once. Did not write, telephone or even send a telepathic message. Has not communicated with me in any way, shape or form whatsoever but since she was such an odd little thing (looked like a mushroom with that peroxide butch cut of hair) I think she just might be dead by now or a victim of amnesia or it's even possible she was picked up by men in white coats and placed in an institution with bars on the windows for being a bit funny in the head.

Not that her funniness in the head stuck out on her like a wart on the end of your nose. No, it was nothing that obvious since she didn't strip naked in public or make obscene gestures toward me like a couple of my previous tenants did, but astute persons—and in all modesty I place myself among them—have a gift for picking out the loonies in our midst without any formal training in this field so I knew from the start when she came to inquire about my little three-room house next door with bundle in arm and ad in hand that she was not what you would call well balanced.

Now normally I prefer renting the place to a single person unencumbered because of its size. However, I considered the alternatives. Single elderly women die. Single young women live licentious lives. Single young men window peep. Single elderly men pick either their noses or locks. So that's how I happened to let Mrs. Tinker and her precious sleeping bundle become the new occupants of my freshly painted Grandma Moses cottage. And because it was none of my business, I neither inquired nor speculated as to whether she was widowed, divorced or deserted or

had got her wedding ring from the dime store or stolen it but privately I thought she was no more married than I am though in my own particular case it was not from lack of opportunity.

'Now I insist upon having my privacy,' Mrs. Tinker said in her tinny little voice after I consented to rent her the house but she would not transfer the bundle in her arms to me while she dug in her shoulder bag for the first month's cash in advance which was one of my stipulations in the ad. Neither would she permit me to hold the bundle when she arrived in a cab to move in on the Fourth of July and a scorcher of a day it was, too, so I offered her a glass of lemonade and some freshly baked gingersnaps just to get started on the right foot which she testily refused.

'I don't have time to fritter,' she snapped with a toss of her mushroom head. 'My baby needs his bath.' (Paranoid, I concluded. Afraid I'd make off with the infant since most people are damn fools and think all elderly unmarried women are just dying to change a mussed diaper.) So I did not detain her but handed over the keys and did not so much as watch out the window as the taxi driver moved her into the house with all her worldly belongings including a beat up old wicker buggy. A diaper pail. And a brand new pink plastic laundry basket.

Now my saying that my new tenant arrived in a taxi with all her worldly belongings does not indicate anything unusual since I have always rented the cottage furnished in order to save wear and tear on the enamelled door frames. Consequently all my tenants have taken up occupancy in similar fashion. Fly-by-nighters, I call them. Live from hand to mouth with not even a pot to throw out the window. Come with a suitcase and a carton or two and voila! They're settled in within fifteen minutes and then they're off and running. Odd, but not downright eccentric I would label such people. However, none of my previous tenants ever exhibited such downright peculiar behavior from the very beginning as did Mrs. Tinker who, from the first day she moved into the house and every day thereafter whether in rain or shine, would hang on the clothesline out back exactly eleven snow-white diapers—except on Sunday as if she had trained the baby to show proper respect for the Sabbath by holding its pee till Monday. Yet on Monday when there should have been twenty-two diapers on the line (two times eleven if I know my numbers) there were only eleven. No more. No less. Therefore it is readily understandable my hardly being able to wait to set eyes upon this extraordinary infant which I tried my

damndest to do using all manner of tricks at hand but in this harmless trivial pursuit of mine Mrs. Tinker did not cooperate. Did not cooperate at all. Did, in fact, knock me on my asphodel when I attempted one Monday morning, coming back from the trash barrel, to peek down inside the blue-blanketed bundle in its wicker buggy as Mommy hung diapers on the line at precisely eight o'clock and this time did not ever vary from one day to the next. You could set your clock by it and I did—except on Sunday. (Obsessive compulsive, I said to myself, for I am particularly good at this sort of snap diagnosis.)

'Please,' the creature said angrily as I struggled to my feet from the unwarranted attack. 'I do not permit strangers to breathe their germs in my baby's face.' And off she went into the house in a fury and fuss pushing the baby buggy as fast as her two spindly bowlegs could carry her and I know a thing or two about bowlegged women that shall remain unsaid.

So if my new neighbor was not as neighborly as one might expect, neither were any of her predecessors which did not bother me in the least since I am what you would call sufficient unto myself and not dependent upon others for companionship. Consequently I left Miss Mushroom strictly alone with her shades drawn taking comfort in the fact that the house was rented and I was not forced into boarding up the windows again as protection from vandals.

Well, the succeeding summer weeks passed without incident. I saw my neighbor as little as I had to (I can draw my shades as well as the next one) and our only face-to-face encounter occurred when she handed me the rent on the first of the following month at her back door through which she did not once invite me to set foot. Did, in fact, almost bob my nose in the screen door when I did not remove it quickly enough to suit her fancy the instant our transaction was completed but let it tarry for a moment in mid air while trying to see inside. Further glimpses I caught of her were confined to exactly three o'clock afternoons when she left with the buggy presumably to air her baby and there were also a few occasions when I spied her at the grocery store studying labels on baby food jars but she always fled the instant she saw me (as though I were the store detective and she a shoplifter) before I had opportunity to point out the benefits of fresh fruit and vegetables over canned for the infant since I am something of an amateur nutritionist and know a thing or two about causes of acne, baldheadedness and sexual promiscuity all of which could be stamped out

at the kitchen stove if women weren't so all fired lazy. And so damn dumb to boot.

So then.

Bright and early one Sunday morning toward summer's end, before I was even out of my nightgown and had not yet brought in the paper, who should rap sharply upon my back door with blue bundle in arm and buggy in tow but Mrs. Mushroom dressed not in her customary maternity smock and tennis shoes but in an outmoded, worse for the wear ecru lace wedding dress I had seen on a dummy in the Salvation Army store down at the corner just the previous afternoon while disposing of some of my junk.

'Will you please take care of my baby please while I take care of some very important business?' she asked in a distraught voice and, barely waiting for the words of assent to leave my mouth, she pushed both bundle and buggy at me the latter containing a pile of exactly eleven snow-white diapers, a baby bottle filled with milk and an assortment of plastic toys all scrupulously clean and off she went into the back seat of a taxi to keep her assignation.

Now I am nobody's fool.

I know how you can tell a girl baby from a boy baby so I made it my business to find out which one I had on my hands for sure since I didn't even know the infant's name, when what should I discover inside the blanket but Teddy in all his cuddly sweetness, diapered and talced.

Well, to make a long story short, Teddy and I have stuck together ever since that day through thick and thin. Of course, if it had been a big German shepherd Mrs. Toadstool had left on my hands I'd have got rid of him a long time ago because three years would be an awfully long time to go around picking up pooh from the lawn but Teddy has been no trouble whatsoever. I enjoy him and he seems to enjoy me. Why, you should just see the way he keeps me company in the basement while I'm washing as I scoot him around in his little baby tender between loads and you should just see how cute he looks in his little high chair and Pennsylvania Dutch rocker I scraped and restored, all of which I got at the Salvation. Then at Christmas time I even take pictures.

So now my only problem is that I let him sleep with me in my old four-poster but because of his age and the wear and tear he gets from me hugging him in my sleep, he's now begun to leak sawdust and I'm afraid it won't be long before I'll have to keep him in a plastic bag hanging from the bedpost, if I want him to last.