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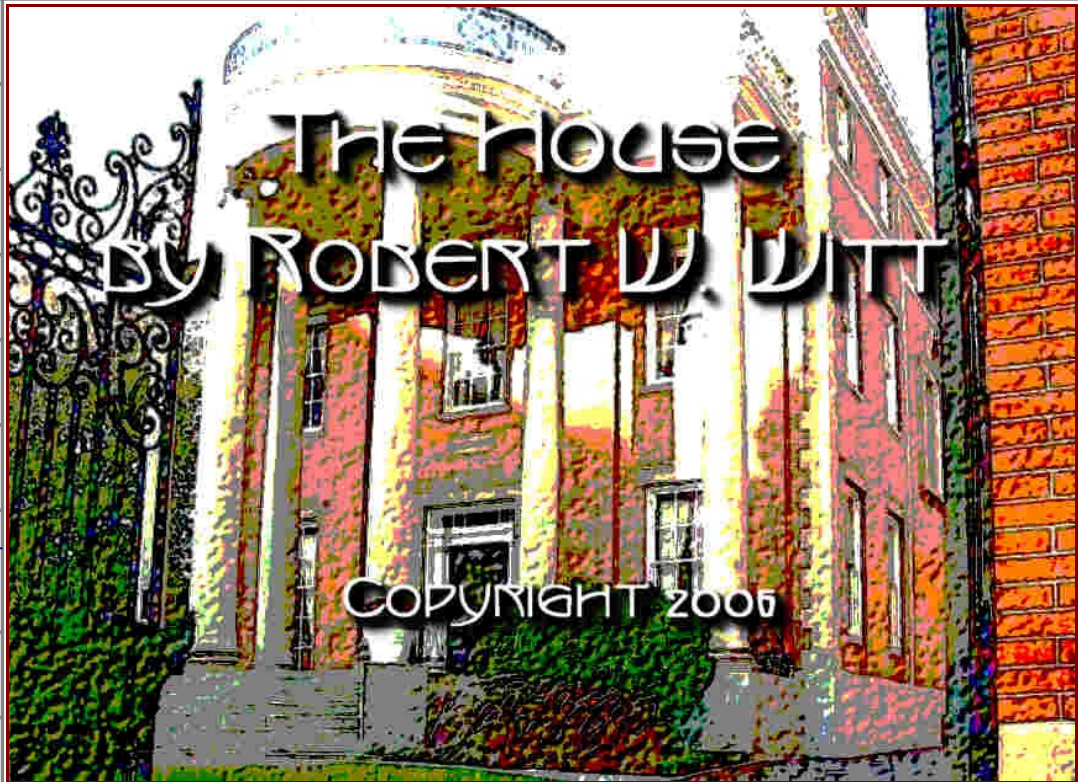
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Paul Stuart sat in his car at the end of the driveway, smoking and staring at the house on the hill, as he had been doing for the past few afternoons. The imposing house reflected to a degree the neglect into which most of these old, once-elegant country houses had descended. A large square house with a front portico on the crown of the hill, it definitely retained the mien of its aristocratic past. The gutters needed repair, though, and a few brief yellow stains crept down the white brick walls. Chips in the green paint of the shutters appeared even from this distance. Paul wondered if Mrs. Boyd would paint it. If not, it didn't look too bad. Paul took a long draw on his cigarette and exhaled the smoke slowly. No use sitting here, he thought. I'm not accomplishing anything this way. He started the car, took a last long look at the house, and backed out of the driveway onto the highway. As he drove into town, he tried to force the house out of his mind, but no matter what he pushed into his mind, the house reasserted itself as the dominant image. He knew that he would spend the entire weekend thinking of nothing else.

"Good morning, Rand," Paul said as he opened the office door. "How was the weekend?"

"I finished grading a set of themes," Rand glanced up from his book. "How was yours?"

"Uneventful--as always."

Rand returned to his book for a moment but then laid it on the desk. He stared across the room at Paul. "Did you make a decision?"

"No--not really."

"You have to today, don't you?"

"Yes. I have an appointment with Mrs. Boyd at four o'clock."

“What do you think you’ll do?”

“I . . . I’m not certain. I may take it.”

Rand glanced at his closed book and halfway opened the cover as though he were going to read again. He and Paul had discussed the house several times since last Wednesday, when Paul first learned that the house was available. Paul discussed everything with Rand. He had been placed in the office with him when he first came here three years ago, and Rand had automatically become his closest friend. Paul didn’t make friends easily. He waited for people to come to him, but he projected an austere image, and most people didn’t bother. As he had been forced upon Rand, though, he had opened up to him more than to anyone else here. Paul sometimes marveled at the fact because they were almost complete opposites and disagreed on just about everything. Paul thought the standards at the school were too low; Rand didn’t agree. Paul thought it an injustice to pass students who actually were not capable of college work; Rand, an injustice to fail them. Paul liked Bach; Rand, Bluegrass. Paul always wore a coat and tie to class; Rand, never. And on and on. But Paul liked Rand and usually listened to his advice.

Paul saw that Rand was only fingering the book. “You don’t think I should, do you?”

Rand took a deep breath. “Paul, I don’t--I mean it’s none of my business. You have to do what you think is best.”

“But you really don’t think I should.”

“I . . . just can’t see why you need such a big house.”

“It’s not all that big. I mean the rooms are large, but there aren’t many.”

“It’s a pretty big house.”

“You’re right. I don’t need all the space, of course, but I could keep the upstairs closed. That should work fine for me, and it would probably help with the heat bill.”

“If you’re not planning to use all the house, why not look for a smaller one?”

“I need large rooms, or at least one large room. My piano, you know, is seven feet long, and when you stuff a piano that large into a small room with low ceilings it doesn’t sound good and it doesn’t look good. One of those large rooms out there with the high ceiling would just be perfect.”

“Why not get a smaller piano?”

“I can’t practice on a spinet, for God’s sake.”

“Why not?”

“Because the action and the tone--Oh, you’re not a pianist. You wouldn’t understand.”

“You’re not either.”

Paul jerked his head up almost as though he had been slapped.

“I mean not a professional pianist. For Christ’s sake, Paul, you’re an English teacher.”

“So I should stop playing the piano?”

“I didn’t say that. Of course you should continue, but you act like it was your career.”

“I had planned for it to be.”

“Then why didn’t you go on with it?”

“I . . . I wasn’t good enough, not good enough to be a professional.”

“Did someone tell you that, or did you decide it?”

“I decided.”

“O.K. You decided. You changed your major. You planned your career.”

“But I can’t give up that Baldwin. It was my carrot all through graduate school--all through the dissertation.”

“To lease a house you can’t afford for the sake of a piano you don’t really need seems to me to have things a bit out of focus. You could keep the apartment and get a smaller piano.”

“Well, I think I should get a house to fit the piano, not a piano to fit the house.” He paused. “I’ve got to do something. I’m sick of sleeping with my feet under the piano.”

Rand appeared to be suppressing a smile. “That was clever to put the piano in the bedroom.”

“It’s the only place I could put it unless I didn’t want any furniture in the living room.”

“And only in the bedroom with the foot of the bed under it.” Rand chuckled.

“Yes, God, wall to wall piano.” Paul took out a cigarette and lit it. “It’s not just the space, though. I can’t play as much as I want or when I want. I certainly can’t play late at night, which is the time I like best. Up on that hill out there away from everyone I could play until three o’clock in the morning if I wanted to. Besides, I like old houses. I always have. An old house has charm and personality, and one doesn’t come available just every day. It seems I should have some pleasure here. I don’t enjoy my work, that’s for sure. Lazy students who won’t do any work. But they’re certainly willing to yelp about grades. They drive me crazy. Some of them even come in here at night while I’m trying to work just to argue. They don’t want to listen to an explanation of why they got the grade, just argue that they deserve better.” He exhaled some smoke with a hissing sound.

“Why didn’t you go somewhere else?”

"You know damn well why I didn't," Paul snapped.

"That's the point. Since this was the only offer you had, maybe you should be happy to have it."

"I am." Paul spoke more calmly. "I'm fortunate, I know. Some of the people who finished when I did still haven't found a teaching job." Raising his hands in a helpless gesture, he continued, "But, Lord, a regional university in a state famed for its low academic standards. I wanted to go to a good school--maybe one of those private schools with stiff entrance requirements."

"But you didn't. Perhaps you should make the best of what you've got here."

"I do," Paul spoke defensively. "I try."

"O.K. O.K. Let's say you have some reason for wanting the house. But you told me yourself that you can't afford it."

"I can't right now. But if . . . if things go as I hope, I think I'll be able to."

"That's the trouble, though. Nothing is settled yet."

"I know. Damn! I wish that committee had already made the recommendations."

"I imagine the committee has. Hulett just hasn't gotten around to giving the reports yet."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right. The Bastard--naturally he would be the one to hold things up. Especially for me--he doesn't like me anyway."

"He has a lot to do. After all, Christ, he's the chairman of the department. And you know he has to meet with the dean to review each case before he can give the reports."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Paul pushed his hair up from the left side. He had begun parting his hair lower on the side in an effort to cover a receding hairline, but the hair from the side only drifted back and pulled some from the top, making the hairline appear more receding. Paul constantly pushed at his forehead, particularly when he was agitated or nervous. His students had listed this distracting mannerism on the last evaluation. "Say," he continued, "do you suppose that if I went and talked with Hulett--told him the situation--he would tell me what they've recommended?"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"No, I suppose not. Damn, damn. Everything is so uncertain."

"That's just what I said. It seems to me that it's too uncertain, too risky for you to take a chance. Didn't you tell me you'd have to sign a five-year lease?"

"Yes."

"Whew. That could cause you a lot of trouble if--if the committee . . . I mean Louise and I didn't even think about buying a house until I got tenure."

"It's not tenure so much I'm worried about. It's the promotion."

Rand's eyes narrowed as he looked at Paul. "But that is something to think about."

"Surely you don't think--"

"Christ, Paul, I don't know. I don't-it's none of my business."

"Tell me. What do you think?"

"Gosh, Paul, Christ, forget it. I don't know."

"I want to know."

Rand hesitated and bit his lower lip. Then he began slowly, uncertainly. "You . . . you don't have any publications."

Paul winced. Some of the other assistant professors who had come here at the same time had pulled an article or two from their dissertations. Paul, though, revised his entire dissertation, planning to publish it as a book. He had finished the manuscript last October, but as yet had not found a publisher for it. "They say this is a teaching school--they don't emphasize publications," he grumbled.

"But publications help."

"All right. That's one point against me." Rand remained silent, but Paul prompted, "What else?"

"Ah, you . . . said they emphasize teaching here."

"I work hard in my classes!" Paul tried to control his anger. "I give the students something worthwhile. Good Lord, some of the people here don't do anything."

"I agree--on both counts. But . . . you know how it is here. The administration likes to see the teacher as the students' friend. Being popular with the students is very important." Rand spoke slowly, cautiously still. "And a great deal of importance is placed on grade curves."

Paul sat up and slammed his hand on the desk. "I am honest and fair with my grades! I dare anybody to challenge that."

"Yes, I know you are. But you've failed 30 to 40 percent of every class you've had since you've been here."

"Nincompoops who didn't do any work. I didn't just fail them--they didn't do anything."

"Christ, Paul, you expect too much."

"I can't pass some son-of-a-bitch who tells me that *Everyman* is the best play Shakespeare wrote, or one who spells medieval three different ways within one paragraph." Paul's voice was rising.

"All right, all right. You have to do it your way. I know that. But you asked me

what I thought. I'm just trying to be honest. You've got to be realistic."

"I'm not angry with you." Paul relaxed in his chair. "It's just that I'm on edge. I've worried so much about this thing. You're right. I'm not popular here . . . I certainly know that. Hulett doesn't like me because I've caused him problems, all those students going to him about their grades. But still I can't believe that he would . . . get rid of me. I don't crusade for reform or get involved in politics or anything like that. And I can't help thinking that at least someone appreciates the fact that I work hard in my classes. The main reason I haven't gotten anything ready for publication, except the dissertation, is that I spend so much time preparing lectures and writing comments on student papers."

Rand glanced at his watch, got up, and began loading his briefcase. "I've got a class--I have to go. I'm sure that many people appreciate your work. Just . . . just forget what I said. You have to make your own decisions. Just forget it, O.K.?"

"I appreciate what you've said, Rand. I appreciate your being honest with me. It's just that . . . that—O.K."

Rand closed his briefcase, picked up his coffee jug, and opened the door. "What time is your appointment with Mrs. Boyd?"

"Four o'clock."

"Oh, well, I'll probably see you again before then. If not, do what you think is best."

"Sure."

Paul turned in his chair to stare out the window as Rand closed the door.

"You'll just love Beckwith Hill, Mr. Stuart." Mrs. Boyd handed Paul the lease. She was an attractive middle-aged woman.

"Yes'm, I'm sure I will."

"Oh, it's so quiet and peaceful out there, and the air is clean and pure. Why, you just feel like you're on top of the world. You know my great-grandfather built that place."

"Yes'm, you told me."

"And it's been in the Beckwith family ever since. If I had my way, my husband and I would be living there today. But Mr. Boyd prefers to live here in town, and naturally I have to do what he wants. But it is a dear place. I know you'll take care of it for me, Mr. Stuart."

"I'll certainly try."

"I never rent it to anyone unless I feel that they will love the place and take care of it just like I would. That's why I insist on a five-year lease--so I know there's a real commitment."

"Yes'm."

“Well now, when will you be able to get moved in?”

“Let’s see . . . it’s the fifteenth today-“ Paul broke off, the Ides of March. It had not occurred to him. “Ah,” he continued, “I’ll plan to move on the twenty-sixth. That’ll give me almost two weeks to get things packed and make the arrangements.”

Fine, fine. The sooner, the better. I don’t like to leave the place vacant any longer than I have to. Oh, let me get the keys for you.” She opened a desk drawer. “Here they are. Each one has a label so you’ll know which doors they fit.”

“Thank you.”

“I hope you will be happy, Mr. Stuart, and I know you will be. No one can be sad on Beckwith Hill.”

Pray God you’re right, Paul thought. He said, “I’m certain I will be. I’ve admired that place ever since I came here.”

“And now it’s your home, Mr. Stuart. Isn’t that grand?”

“Yes’m.”

“Well, now, is there anything else? Do you have any questions?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ll call you if I think of something later.”

“Please do. I’m here most of the time.”

“Well, good day, and thank you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stuart, thank you. Here, I’ll walk you to the door.”

Paul said good day again at the door and then hurried down the walk. It was a chilly, damp day, and Paul pulled his coat closer around him as he rushed to the car. He wanted to feel elated, but couldn’t. In fact, he began to feel depressed, and a knot began to develop in his stomach. He decided to drive out to the house and look at the rooms again and plan where he would put things although he had already arranged them in his mind.

Parking at the front steps, Paul got out and gazed at the countryside below. Beautiful, he thought. Then he climbed the steps and put the key in the front door. The weather had been damp for the past several days, and the wood had swelled so that he couldn’t turn the key. He struggled for several minutes. “Damn! Wouldn’t you know it-wouldn’t you just know it,” he muttered. He pulled out the key and grimaced as he looked at the door. Remembering that Mrs. Boyd had taken him in the kitchen door when she showed him the house, he hurried around to the back.

That key turned easily, and Paul stepped inside, still annoyed because he couldn’t open the front door. He ambled through the rooms, visualizing in each the furniture which he had already mentally placed. Everything would fit as he had planned. He stopped for a long while at the spot where the piano would go. It would be perfect, just perfect. He marveled again at the woodwork and the fireplaces, but he couldn’t rid himself of his depression.

The power was off, so there was no heat. After a while, chilled, Paul decided to drive back to town and have a drink at his apartment before dinner. He hoped the drink would warm him and make him feel better. Maybe even feel like celebrating. He intended to try the front door from the inside, but he stopped in the entrance hall and turned back to the kitchen. At the car he leaned with his hand on the door handle and looked at the house. "It's got to work--it has to work," he said softly and got into the car.

As he pulled onto the highway at the end of the drive, he recognized the driver of an approaching car--a student in one of his classes. Paul raised his hand to wave, but the boy stared determinedly straight ahead at the highway. "Son-of-a-bitch," Paul muttered as he lowered his hand. "Son-of-a-bitch." He pulled his coat closer around him, but the chill seemed to have penetrated his bones and he shivered inwardly as he settled back for the drive into town.

Robert W. Witt, a member of the faculty at Eastern Kentucky University, has published four novels in addition to plays and scholarly books. His stories and articles have appeared in numerous journals, including *The Wooster Review*, *San Jose Studies*, *Southern Literary Journal*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *Hamlet Studies*, and others. His plays have been performed at The Attic Ensemble, Jersey City, NJ; The Writers' Theatre, Farmingdale, NY; FirstStage, Los Angeles; and other theaters. He is working on a fifth novel and serving as managing editor of *The Chaffin Journal*, an annual literary review published at Eastern Kentucky University.

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