

There had been a moment when I believed I recognized, faint and far, the cry of a child....

—the narrator, *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James

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As I drove down the long avenue of evergreens that led to Briarwood, I had the sensation of moving farther and farther away from the world of familiar objects and into a strange dream. The mansion itself emerged at the end of the avenue like a vision seen in a dream: tall white pillars, red and yellow peonies in stone urns, blooming gardens glimpsed through an open archway, a towering statue of a winged goddess on a pedestal. I was immediately charmed by the place, although I could not help wishing James had consulted me before purchasing it. Yes, that was quite like him. All his life when he wanted something, he went after it. I suppose in the beginning that was what had attracted me to him. It was later, after we were married, that I learned this was not the happiest of traits in a husband. The intervening years had not mellowed his aggressiveness, and I had come to accept it. I resigned myself to Briarwood just as I had to so many other whims that preceded it.

I knew even before I saw the place that I would spend most of my hours there, not James. The idea of living in the country appealed to him, but the demands of his job would keep him in the city. He never asked if I might object to living in the country. Tactfully I tried to reason with him. Briarwood might be undeniably beautiful, but it would be lonely too. As usual, he refused to listen. He insisted the country air would do me good and the solitude would soothe my nerves. I would not be entirely alone, for there would be a housekeeper and a groundskeeper. Every weekend he would drive down from the city to join me. He made me feel that to object would be mean-spirited. Besides, I knew how futile it was to oppose him.

As I had foreseen, from the first I was on my own at Briarwood. When the day to move arrived, an important business transaction detained James in the city, and I went ahead without him. Unpacking was a relatively simple chore because we were moving little furniture. The furniture in our house in the city had been mainly contemporary, and James did not think it appropriate for Briarwood. He was quite right. Briarwood had its own lovely antiques—mahogany tables, elegant settees, gilt-framed mirrors, Tiffany lamps, Chinese vases, and charming bric-a-brac—all of which suited it far better than our sleekly contemporary furnishings.

Once our belongings were unpacked, I had to decide how to occupy myself in the big old house. I was relieved to have the housekeeper, Mrs. Gower, about, for I dreaded the idea of being alone. Several times I sought her out for a few minutes of conversation. She was a warm motherly woman whom I took to at once. She lived with a grown daughter who delivered her to Briarwood every morning and picked her up each evening. Talking to her, I sensed that she was eager to please. She was, it seemed, afraid I might think her too old for the position, and she was anxious to demonstrate her reliability. As soon as I realized this, I assured her that she would do perfectly.

When I could no longer impose my presence on Mrs. Gower without appearing to do so out of loneliness and boredom, I set off to explore the house and its grounds. The house was one of those magnificent old places, full of dark wainscoting, somber paintings in ornate frames, rococo

mirrors, four-poster beds, Persian carpets, busts of famous men, and statuary of figures from classical mythology. In every room there were a number of clocks—grandfather clocks that chimed sonorously, intricately carved Swiss cuckoo clocks, mantel clocks over the fireplaces, and painted porcelain clocks. I fancied as I made my way through the house that their ticking followed me from room to room.

Downstairs a pair of French doors opened from the elegant living room onto a flagstone patio. The lawn stretched away smooth and green to a succession of flower gardens. Exploring, I discovered a large stone sundial, benches and love seats, hedges artfully sculpted to resemble animals—each one different—a deer, a bear, a giraffe, an elephant, a wolf—and statues of classical figures, some prominently displayed, like the winged woman on her pedestal who guarded the front entrance, others tucked away in secluded shady bowers among the gardens.

In the afternoon I decided to take advantage of the fine weather and set my easel up in the garden. From the windows of the house I had spotted a sunken pool with a cherub poised at its farther end. On closer examination, the pool proved to have no water in it. I couldn't decide if that was what gave the spot such a forsaken air, or if it was the cherub which brooded over the scene like a mournful spirit.

I soon lost myself in my painting, trying to capture on canvas the peculiar mottled red tile bottom of the sunken pool. I remember I began to feel a sense of contentment as the sun warmed me and the birds chirped deliriously in the trees. I don't know how long I worked; I lost track of time. I was sketching the sweet-faced cherub when I felt inexplicably overwhelmed with sadness. I had no idea what caused this feeling. It was just suddenly there—an immense sorrow that washed over me in an unexpected wave.

Too upset to continue, I laid aside my brush. I thought a walk might make me feel better, so I set off down one of the many paths that meandered around the grounds. After following it past bushes of blooming red flowers and down narrow aisles between tall hedges, I found myself in a small grove where to my surprise I heard children's voices. Through the leaves I glimpsed a gazebo in a small clearing. It might have been a scene in a fairy tale. Roses bloomed on the trellises. The roof shone like gold in the sunlight. Within the gazebo two children were playing—a young girl of about ten and a boy of perhaps eight. The girl, weaving a chain of daisies, sat on the bench that ran around the circumference while the boy bounced a red ball.

For a while I watched them from behind my leafy hiding place, reluctant to invade their idyll. I assumed they were neighbor children and resolved to ask Mrs. Gower about them when I returned to the house. I had no intention of intruding on their play, for it occurred to me that the sudden and unexpected appearance of a stranger might frighten them, and if I frightened them, they might not come back again. You see I knew even then that I wanted—oh, very much—for them to come again.

How long did I stand thus watching them—a quarter of an hour? An hour or more? Time seemed to stand still, so peaceful and happy did I feel. But at last I knew I must leave them. Quietly I retreated. In retracing my steps I must have taken a wrong path, which was easily done at Briarwood, considering what a maze of them existed. I came upon a wrought iron gate in a crumbling brick wall. Curious, I pushed it open and found myself in a rose garden. All around me bloomed roses—white, pink, red, yellow. The air was heavy with their perfume. On an impulse I decided to pluck a few to carry back to the house. This turned out to be not quite as easy as I had envisioned. Thorns scratched my hands as I broke off two red roses.

I was just turning back to the gate with my spoils when a man suddenly appeared before me as if he had sprung from the ground. He wore a hat which shaded his face and his clothes were shabby, even dirty. Malevolently he stared at me.

“You’re trespassing,” I said, trying to hide my fear.

In answer he spit on the ground contemptuously. Beneath his hat he had hard cruel eyes. With a shock I noticed a dead animal in his hand. It dangled head down like a bedraggled rat, small and lifeless.

I wondered if Mrs. Gower could hear me from the house if I screamed. How far from the house was I? Glancing around uneasily, I tried to catch a glimpse of it, but a tall hedge enclosed the garden like a wall and blocked out all view of the house.

Then it occurred to me that the man before me must be the groundskeeper. If so, he probably thought I was the trespasser. In fact, he had just caught me stealing flowers. I glanced guiltily at the roses in my hands.

“They’re for the house,” I explained.

When he still said nothing, just stood there staring at me in that unnerving way, I turned and hurried out the gate, intent on getting away from him. I decided to ask James to hire another groundskeeper. This one looked dangerous, and I didn’t feel safe with him on the premises. He struck me as a man to be feared. I thought of the children in the gazebo and shivered. Did they know about the groundskeeper and take care to avoid him?

I was breathless when I reached the house. My first thought was to find Mrs. Gower. I ran from room to room searching for her until I found her at last in the pantry making a list of supplies.

“Whatever’s the matter?” she asked in alarm. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Worse,” I said. “I’ve just seen the groundskeeper.”

“Jack Lynch, you mean?”

I nodded and shuddered.

“And was he so awful?”

“Terrible.”

She glanced at the window anxiously as if he might be standing there watching us. I suddenly felt certain that she knew something that she was not telling me.

“What sort of person is he?” I asked. “What do you know about him?”

She glanced from the window to me. Her face had a guarded look. “Did he do something he shouldn’t have?”

I could not describe to her the feeling of fear he had inspired in me, a deep sense of dread, as if I had encountered something utterly evil.

“He doesn’t say much,” she offered. “He’s never been one for words.”

“He had a dead animal in his hand.”

She sighed. “He’s been laying traps for moles. They do awful damage in the gardens.”

I wondered why she seemed so cautious. It was as if she wanted to conceal something from me. Her eyes fell on the roses in my hand.

“He doesn’t like people to pick his flowers.”

“I thought they would look pretty on the table,” I explained. At that moment I noticed the scratches on my hands. The thorns had done more damage than I had realized.

“Oh, you’re bleeding!” exclaimed Mrs. Gower. “Let me take those.”

She took the roses from me and went to the kitchen. I followed and watched as she took out a tall cut glass vase and thrust them into it.

“Has he worked here long?” I asked as cool water from the faucet washed over my hands. She hesitated before answering. “A year or so.”

“What did he do before he came here?”

“I don’t know.” She carried the vase of roses into the dining room and set it in the center of the polished mahogany table. “There. Don’t they look nice now?” She clearly didn’t want to talk about the groundskeeper.

“But didn’t he have references?” I persisted. “Surely you must know something about him.”

She gave me a pained look. “Please, ma’am, I’m just an old woman. I don’t know anything. He does his job and I do mine. I don’t go poking my nose in his business and he doesn’t go poking his nose in mine.”

I looked at her good face creased with anxiety and decided not to torment her further. She was afraid of the man for some reason. Her very reluctance to speak reinforced my own misgivings about him. I became yet more determined to bring the matter to James’ attention when he came that weekend.

But then James called late Friday night to say he was not coming after all.

“I can’t possibly get away,” he said, sounding distant.

“But I’ve looked forward to it,” I told him. “Are you sure you can’t come? Not even for one day?” I was disheartened at the prospect that I would be alone at Briarwood for another full week before I saw him again.

“Sorry. It’s out of the question. I’ll make it up to you.” I could imagine him looking at his watch. As usual, he was in a rush. He was just coming from an important conference or late to an appointment, or both.

In my disappointment I forgot to mention the groundskeeper and didn’t remember until after I hung up. I tried to resume the book I had been reading but it no longer seemed interesting. I listened to the monotonous ticking of the clocks and felt acutely a sense of loneliness and abandonment. Briarwood had never on any of the previous nights seemed so desolate. Nor had it seemed so prey to random noises—the tapping of a branch against a windowpane, the creak of a floorboard, the sigh of the wind in the eaves. The groundskeeper crept into my thoughts, spurring me to check the locks on the doors again. I glanced nervously out the windows at the lawn with its moonlit vistas and ominous shadows and longed for our house in the city, where even if I were alone at night, I was surrounded by neighbors and protected by cruising police.