

A Lamp in a Window, Truman Capote

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ONCE I WAS INVITED TO a wedding; the bride suggested I drive up from New York with a pair of other guests, a Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, whom I had never met before. It was a cold April day, and on the ride to Connecticut the Robertses, a couple in their early forties, seemed agreeable enough—no one you would want to spend a long weekend with, but not bad.

However, at the wedding reception a great deal of liquor was consumed, I should say a third of it by my chauffeurs. They were the last to leave the party—at approximately 11 P.M.—and I was most wary of accompanying them; I knew they were drunk, but I didn't realize how drunk. We had driven about twenty miles, the car weaving considerably, and Mr. and Mrs. Roberts insulting each other in the most extraordinary language (really, it was a moment out of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*), when Mr. Roberts, very understandably, made a wrong turn and got lost on a dark country road.

I kept asking them, finally begging them, to stop the car and let me out, but they were so involved in their invectives that they ignored me. Eventually the car stopped of its own accord (temporarily) when it swiped against the side of a tree. I used the opportunity to jump out the car's back door and run into the woods. Presently the cursed vehicle drove off, leaving me alone in the icy dark. I'm sure my hosts never missed me; Lord knows I didn't miss them.

But it wasn't a joy to be stranded out there on a windy cold night. I started walking, hoping I'd reach a highway. I walked for half an hour without sighting a habitation. Then, just off the road, I saw a small frame cottage with a porch and a window lighted by a lamp. I tiptoed onto the porch and looked in the window; an elderly woman with soft white hair and a round pleasant face was sitting by a fireside reading a book. There was a cat curled in her lap, and several others slumbering at her feet.

I knocked at the door, and when she opened it I said, with chattering teeth: "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I've had a sort of accident; I wonder if I could use your phone to call a taxi." "Oh, dear," she said, smiling. "I'm afraid I don't have a phone. Too poor. But please, come in." And as I stepped through the door into the cozy room, she said: "My goodness, boy. You're freezing. Can I make coffee? A cup of tea? I have a little whiskey my husband left—he died six years ago."

I said a little whiskey would be very welcome. While she fetched it I warmed my hands at the fire and glanced around the room. It was a cheerful place occupied by six or seven cats of varying alley-cat colors. I looked at the title of the book Mrs. Kelly—for that was her name, as I later learned—had been reading: it was *Emma* by Jane Austen, a favorite writer of mine.

When Mrs. Kelly returned with a glass of ice and a dusty quarter-bottle of bourbon, she said: "Sit down, sit down. It's not often I have company. Of course, I have my cats. Anyway, you'll spend the night? I have a nice little guest room that's been waiting such a long time for a guest. In the morning you can walk to the highway and catch a ride into town, where you'll find a garage to fix your car. It's about five miles away."

I wondered aloud how she could live so isolatedly, without transportation or a telephone; she told me her good friend, the mailman, took care of all her shopping needs. "Albert. He's really so dear and faithful. But he's due to retire next year. After that I don't know what I'll do. But something will turn up. Perhaps a kindly new mailman. Tell me, just what sort of accident did you have?"

When I explained the truth of the matter, she responded indignantly: "You did exactly the right thing. I wouldn't set foot in a car with a man who had sniffed a glass of sherry. That's how I lost my husband. Married forty years, forty happy years, and I lost him because a drunken driver ran him down. If it wasn't for my cats ..." She stroked an orange tabby purring in her lap.

We talked by the fire until my eyes grew heavy. We talked about Jane Austen ("Ah, Jane.

My tragedy is that I've read all her books so often I have them memorized"), and other admired authors: Thoreau, Willa Cather, Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler, Hawthorne, Chekhov, De Maupassant—she was a woman with a good and varied mind; intelligence illuminated her hazel eyes like the small lamp shining on the table beside her. We talked about the hard Connecticut winters, politicians, far places ("I've never been abroad, but if ever I'd had the chance, the place I would have gone is Africa.

Sometimes I've dreamed of it, the green hills, the heat, the beautiful giraffes, the elephants walking about"), religion ("Of course, I was raised a Catholic, but now, I'm almost sorry to say, I have an open mind. Too much reading, perhaps"), gardening ("I grow and can all my own vegetables; a necessity"). At last: "Forgive my babbling on. You have no idea how much pleasure it gives me. But it's way past your bedtime. I know it is mine."

She escorted me upstairs, and after I was comfortably arranged in a double bed under a blissful load of pretty scrap-quilts, she returned to wish me goodnight, sweet dreams. I lay awake thinking about it. What an exceptional experience—to be an old woman living alone here in the wilderness and have a stranger knock on your door in the middle of the night and not only open it but warmly welcome him inside and offer him shelter. If our situations had been reversed, I doubt that I would have had the courage, to say nothing of the generosity.

The next morning she gave me breakfast in her kitchen. Coffee and hot oatmeal with sugar and tinned cream, but I was hungry and it tasted great. The kitchen was shabbier than the rest of the house; the stove, a rattling refrigerator, everything seemed on the edge of expiring. All except one large, somewhat modern object, a deep-freeze that fitted into a corner of the room.

She was chatting on: "I love birds. I feel so guilty about not tossing them crumbs during the winter. But I can't have them gathering around the house. Because of the cats. Do you care for cats?"

"Yes, I once had a Siamese named Toma. She lived to be twelve, and we traveled everywhere together. All over the world. And when she died I never had the heart to get another."

"Then maybe you will understand this," she said, leading me over to the deep-freeze, and opening it. Inside was nothing but cats: stacks of frozen, perfectly preserved cats—dozens of them. It gave me an odd sensation. "All my old friends. Gone to rest. It's just that I couldn't

bear to lose them. Completely." She laughed, and said: "I guess you think I'm a bit dotty."

A bit dotty. Yes, a bit dotty, I thought as I walked under grey skies in the direction of the highway she had pointed out to me. But radiant: a lamp in a window.

The End