

Kindred Spirits, Truman Capote

Kindred Spirits

"Of course, it did give me rather a turn; he fell an enormous distance from over the bridge railing to the river: made scarcely a splash. And there was absolutely no one in sight." Mrs. Martin Rittenhouse paused to sigh and stir her tea. "I was wearing a blue dress when it happened. Such a lovely dress—matched my eyes. Poor Martin was very fond of it."

"But I understand drowning is pleasant," said Mrs. Green.

"Oh, yes indeed: an extremely pleasant method of—of departure. Yes, I think if the poor man could have chosen his own way out, I'm certain he would have preferred—water. But, harsh as it may sound, I can't pretend I wasn't considerably cheered to be rid of him."

"So?"

"Drank, among other things," confided Mrs. Rittenhouse grimly. "He was also somewhat over-affectionate, inclined to—dally. And prevaricate."

"Lie, you mean?"

"Among other things."

It was a narrow, high-ceilinged room in which the two ladies talked: a comfortable setting, but without any special distinction. Faded green draperies were drawn against a winter afternoon; a fire, purring drowsily in a stone fireplace, reflected yellow pools in the eyes of a cat, limply curled beside the hearth; a cluster of bells, wound round the throat of the cat, pealed icily whenever he stirred.

"I've never liked men named Martin," said Mrs. Green.

Mrs. Rittenhouse, the visitor, nodded. She was perched stiffly in a fragile-looking chair, persistently churning her tea with a lemon slice. She wore a deep purple dress, and a black, shovel-shaped hat over curly, wig-like grey hair. Her face was thin, but constructed along stern lines, as though modeled by rigorous discipline: a face which seemed content with a single, stricken expression.

"Nor men named Harry," added Mrs. Green, whose husband's name was precisely that. Mrs. Green and her two hundred odd pounds (concealed in a flesh-colored negligee) luxuriously consumed the major portion of a three-seat couch. Her face was huge and hearty, and her eyebrows, plucked nearly naked, were penciled in such an absurd manner that she looked as if someone had startled her in the midst of a shamefully private act. She was filing her nails.

Now between these two women was a connection difficult to define: not friendship, but something more. Perhaps Mrs. Rittenhouse came closest to putting a finger on it when once she said, "We are kindred spirits."

"This all happened in Italy?"

"France," corrected Mrs. Rittenhouse. "Marseille, to be exact. Marvelous city—subtle—all lights and shadows. While Martin fell, I could hear him screaming: quite sinister. Yes, Marseille was exciting. He couldn't swim a stroke, poor man."

Mrs. Green hid the fingernail file between the couch cushions.

"Personally, I feel no pity," she said. "Had it been I—well, he might have had a little help getting over that rail."

"Really?" said Mrs. Rittenhouse, her expression brightening slightly.

"Of course. I've never liked the sound of him. Remember what you told me about the incident in Venice? Aside from that, he manufactured sausage or something, didn't he?"

Mrs. Rittenhouse made a sour bud of her lips. "He was the sausage king. At least, that is what he always claimed. But I shouldn't complain: the company sold for a fabulous sum, although it's beyond me why anyone would want to eat a sausage."

"And look at you!" trumpeted Mrs. Green, waving a well-nourished hand. "Look at you—a free woman. Free to buy and do whatever you please. While I—" she laced her fingers together and solemnly shook her head. "Another cup of tea?"

"Thank you. One lump, please."

Sparks whirred as a log crumpled in the fire. An ormolu clock, set atop the mantel, tolled the time with musical shafts of sound that played on the quiet: five.

Presently, Mrs. Rittenhouse, in a voice sad with memory, said, "I gave the blue dress to a chambermaid at our hotel: there was a tear in the collar where he clutched at me before he fell. And then I went to Paris and lived in a beautiful apartment till Spring. It was a lovely Spring: the children in the park were so neat and quiet; I sat all day feeding crumbs to the pigeons. Parisians are neurotic."

"Was the funeral expensive? Martin's, I mean?"

Mrs. Rittenhouse chuckled gently and, leaning forward, whispered, "I had him cremated. Isn't that priceless? Oh, yes—just wrapped the ashes in a shoebox and sent them to Egypt. Why there, I don't know. Except that he loathed Egypt. I loved it, myself. Marvelous country, but he never wanted to go. That's why it's priceless. However, there is this one thing I find extremely reassuring: I wrote a return address on the package and it never came back. Somehow I feel he must have reached his proper resting place, after all."

Mrs. Green slapped her thigh and bellowed, "The Sausage King among the Pharaohs!" And Mrs. Rittenhouse enjoyed the jest as much as her natural inscrutability would permit.

"But Egypt," sighed Mrs. Green, brushing tears of laughter from her eyes.

"I always say to myself—'Hilda, you were intended for a life of travel—India, the Orient, Hawaii.' That's what I always say to myself." And then, with some disgust, she added, "But you've never met Harry, have you? Oh, my God! Hopelessly dull. Hopelessly bourgeois. Hopelessly!"

"I know the breed," said Mrs. Rittenhouse acidly. "Call themselves the backbone of the nation. Ha, not even nuisance value. My dear, it comes down to this: If they haven't money—get rid of them. If they have—who could make better use of it than oneself?"

"How right you are!"

"Well, it's pathetic and useless to waste yourself on that sort of man. Or any man."

"Precisely," was Mrs. Green's comment. She shifted position, her huge body quivering under the negligee, and dimpled her beefy cheek with a thoughtful finger. "I've often considered divorcing Harry," she said.

"But that's very, very expensive. Then, too, we've been married nineteen years (and engaged five before that) and if I were to even suggest such a thing, I'm positive the shock would just about—"

"Kill him," ended Mrs. Rittenhouse, quickly lowering her eyes to the teacup. A flush of color kindled her cheeks and her lips pursed and unpursed with alarming rapidity. After a little, she said, "I've been thinking of a trip to Mexico. There's a charming place on the coast called Acapulco. A great many artists live there: they paint the sea by moonlight—"

"Mexico. Me-hi-co," said Mrs. Green. "The name sings. Ac-a-pul-co, Me-hi-co." She slammed her palm on the couch's arm. "God, what I wouldn't give to go with you."

"Why not?"

"Why not! Oh, I can just hear Harry saying, 'Sure, how much will you need?' Oh, I can just hear it!" She pounded the couch-arm again. "Naturally, if I had money of my own—well, I haven't, so that's that." Mrs. Rittenhouse turned a speculative eye towards the ceiling; when she spoke her lips barely moved. "But Henry does, doesn't he?" "A little—his insurance—eight thousand or so in the bank—that's all," replied Mrs. Green, and there was nothing casual in her tone. "It would be ideal," said Mrs. Rittenhouse, pressing a thin, crepey hand on the other woman's knee. "Ideal. Just us two. We will rent a little stone house in the mountains overlooking the sea. And in the patio (for we shall have a patio) there will be fruit trees and jasmine, and on certain evenings we shall string Japanese lanterns and have parties for all the artists—" "Lovely!" "—and employ a guitarist to serenade. It shall all be one splendid succession of sunsets and starlight and enchanting walks by the sea." For a long time their eyes exchanged a curious, searching gaze; and the mysterious understanding between them flowered into a mutual smile, which, in Mrs. Green's case, developed to a giggle. "That's silly," she said. "I could never do a thing like that. I would be afraid of getting caught."

"From Paris I went to London," said Mrs. Rittenhouse, withdrawing her hand and tilting her head at a severe angle; yet her disappointment could not be disguised. "A depressing place: dreadfully hot in the summer. A friend of mine introduced me to the Prime Minister. He was—" "Poison?"

"—a charming person."

The bells tinkled as the cat stretched and bathed his paws. Shadow-like, he paraded across the room, his tail arched in the air like a feathered wand; to and fro he stroked his sides against his mistress's stupendous leg. She lifted him, held him to her bosom, and planted a noisy kiss on his nose; "Mummy's angel."

"Germs," declared Mrs. Rittenhouse.

The cat arranged himself languidly and fixed an impertinent stare upon Mrs. Rittenhouse. "I've heard of untraceable poisons, but it's all vague and story-bookish," said Mrs. Green.

"Never poison. Too dangerous, too easily detected."

"But let us suppose that we were going to—to rid ourselves of someone. How would you begin?"

Mrs. Rittenhouse closed her eyes and traced her finger round the rim of the tea-cup. Several words stuttered on her lips, but she said nothing.

"Pistol?"

"No. Definitely no. Firearms involve all sorts of whatnot. At any rate, I don't believe insurance companies recognize suicide—that is what it would have to appear to be. No, accidents are best."

"But the Good Lord would have to take credit for that."

"Not necessarily."

Mrs. Green, plucking at a stray wisp of hair, said, "Oh, stop teasing and talking riddles: what's the answer?"

"I'm afraid there is no consistently true one," said Mrs. Rittenhouse.

"It depends as much upon the setting as the situation. Now, if this were a foreign country it would be simpler. The Marseille police, for instance, took very casual interest in Martin's accident: their investigation was most unthorough."

A look of mild surprise illumined Mrs. Green's face. "I see," she said slowly. "But then, this is not Marseille." And presently volunteered, "Harry swims like a fish: he won a cup at Yale."

"However," continued Mrs. Rittenhouse, "it is by no means impossible. Let me tell you of a statement I read recently in the Tribune: 'Each year a larger percentage of deaths are caused by people falling in their bathtub than by all other accidents combined.' " She paused and eyed Mrs. Green intently. "I find that quite provocative, don't you?"

"I'm not sure whether I follow—"

A brittle smile toyed with the corners of Mrs. Rittenhouse's mouth; her hands moved together, the tips of her fingers delicately meeting and forming a crisp, blue-veined steeple. "Well," she began, "let us suppose that upon the evening the—tragedy—is scheduled, something apparently goes wrong with, say, a bathroom faucet. What does one do?"

"What does one do?" echoed Mrs. Green, frowning.

"This: call to him and ask if he would mind stepping in there a moment. You point to the faucet and then, as he bends to investigate, strike the base of his head—right back here, see?—with something good and heavy. Simplicity itself."

But Mrs. Green's frown persisted. "Honestly, I don't see where that is any accident."

"If you're determined to be so literal!"

"But I don't see—"

"Hush," said Mrs. Rittenhouse, "and listen. Now, this is what one would do next: undress him, fill the tub brim full, drop in a cake of soap and submerge—the corpse." Her smile returned and curved to a wider crescent. "What is the obvious conclusion?"

Mrs. Green's interest was complete, and her eyes were very wide. "What?" she breathed.

"He slipped on the soap, hit his head—and drowned."

The clock tuned six; the notes shimmered away in silence. The fire had gradually sifted to a slumbering bed of coals, and a chill seemed settled on the room like a net spun of ice. The cat's bells shattered the mood as Mrs. Green dropped him plumply to the floor, rose and walked to the window. She parted the draperies and looked out; the sky was drained of color; it was starting to rain: the first drops beaded the glass, distorting an eerie reflection of Mrs. Rittenhouse to which Mrs. Green addressed her next remark:

"Poor man."

The End