

The Familiar Stranger, Truman Capote

The Familiar Stranger

"And Beulah," Nannie called, "before you go, come in here and fix my pillows, this rocking chair's awfully uncomfortable."

"Yes, ma'am, ah'll be right there."

Nannie sighed heavily. She picked up the paper and thumbed through the first sheets to the society section—or social column as there wasn't any real society in Collinsville.

"Let's see now," she said, adjusting her horn rimmed glasses over her proud nose. " 'Mr. and Mrs. Yancey Bates go to Mobile to visit relatives.' Not nothin' much to that, people are always visiting each other," she mused half aloud. She turned down to the death notices, it always gave her a grim pleasure to read them. Day by day the people she had known all her life, the men and women she had grown up with, they were all dying. She was proud that she was still alive while they lay cold and still in their graves.

Beulah came into the room. She came over to the rocker in which Miss Nannie sat reading the paper. She took the pillows out from behind the aging woman's back, puffed them up and arranged them comfortably again behind her mistress's back.

"That feels much better, Beulah. You know I get this rheumatism every time about this year. It's so painful and I do feel so helpless, yes, indeed, so helpless."

Beulah nodded agreeingly, sympathetically.

"Yes, ma'am, ah knows just how it be. Ah had an uncle once near 'bout died from it."

"I see here in the paper, Beulah, where old Will Larson died. Funny no one has called me up or told me about it. He used to be a friend of mine, you know, Beulah, a very good friend." She nodded her head waggishly, implying, of course, that he had been one of her legion of phantom admirers.

"Well," said Beulah, glancing at the big grandfather clock that stood against the wall, "ah guess ah bettah be goin' on down to the doctah's to get yo medicine. Just you stay there and ah'll be back real quick."

She disappeared out the door and in about five minutes Nannie heard the front door slam. She glanced over the paper once more. She tried to get interested in the editorial, she tried the article about the proposed new furniture factory but always by some irresistible, magnetic force she turned back to the obituary notices. She read them over two or three times. Yes, she had known them all.

She looked into the bright red and blue flames that burned in the fireplace. How many times had she gazed into that fireplace? How many cold winter mornings had she arisen from underneath her bright scrap quilts, hopped across the freezing floor and painfully built a fire there? Thousands of times! She had always lived in this house on the main residential street, and so had her father and his father before him. They had been real pioneers, she was proud of her heritage. But all that was past, her mother and father were dead, and her old friends were passing away, slowly, almost unobserved. No one would hardly think that it was the passing of a sort of dynasty, a dynasty of southern aristocracy—the

hamlet, the village, the city. They were passing in the night, the tiny flames of their lives were being blown out by that strange and unseen force.

She pushed the paper out of her lap and closed her eyes. The heat and closeness of the room made her feel sleepy. She had almost fallen to sleep when she was awakened by the grandfather clock chiming the hour. One, two, three, four—

She looked up and she seemed a little startled, she sensed a presence in the room, other than her own. She reached for her glasses and, slipping them on, she looked about the room. Everything seemed in order. It was terribly quiet, there didn't even seem to be the sound of cars passing on the street.

When her eyes finally came to focus she saw him. He was standing directly in front of her. She gave a little gasp.

"Oh," she said, "it's you."

"You know me then?" said the young gentleman.

"Your face seems familiar." Her voice was calm and only surprised.

"I do not wonder," the gentleman spoke eloquently. "I know you quite well. I remember seeing you once when you were a very little girl, you were a sweet child. Don't you remember the time I came to visit your mother?"

Nannie looked at him hard. "No, I don't remember, you could not have known my mother—you are so young. I am an old woman, my mother was dead before you were even born."

"Oh, no—no. I remember your mother quite well. A very reasonable woman. You look somewhat like her. The nose, the eyes, and you both had the same white hair. Quite remarkable, quite!" The man looked down at her. His eyes were very black and his lips were very red, almost as if he had them rouged. He seemed attractive to the old woman; she felt herself being drawn to him.

"I remember you now. Yes, of course, I was just a little girl. But I remember you, you came and woke me up very late one night, the night"—suddenly she gasped, a glint of recognition and horror swept her eyes—"the night my mother died!"

"That's right, my, but you have a remarkable memory, for one so old!" His voice inflected the last few words deliberately. "But you remember me many times since then. The night your father passed away, and there were countless other times. Yes, yes indeed, I have seen you many times and you me, it is only now, this moment, that you should have recognized me. Why, only the other night I was talking to an old friend of yours, Will Larson."

Nannie's face bleached white, her eyes were burning from her head, she could not take her eyes from the man's face. She did not want him to touch her, just so long as he did not touch her she felt quite safe. Presently she said in a hollow voice:

"Then you must be—"

"Now come," interrupted the stranger. "My good lady, let us not quibble. It will not be bad, as a matter of fact it is a rather pleasant sensation."

She grasped the sides of the chair, and began to rock feverishly. "Get away," she whispered hoarsely. "Get away from me, don't touch me, no not

now, is this all I am to get out of life, it isn't fair, stay away, please!"

"Oh," laughed the sleek young gentleman, "madam, you are behaving like a child about to take a castor oil. I assure you it is not the least bit unpleasant. Now, just come here, closer, closer, let me kiss you upon the brow, it will be quite painless, you feel so quiet and restful, it will be just like falling asleep."

Nannie pushed herself as far back in the chair as she could. His red painted lips were coming nearer. She wanted to scream but she couldn't even breathe. She hadn't ever thought it would be like this. She scrouged down in the lowest corners of the chair and pushed one of the pillows tightly over her face. He was strong, she could feel him pulling the pillow away from her. His face, his puckered lips, his amorous eyes; he was like some grotesque lover.

She heard a door slam. She screamed as loud as she could. "Beulah, Beulah, Beulah!" She heard the running footsteps. She pushed the pillow away. The colored woman's black face looked down at her.

"What's ailin' you, Miss Nannie? Is somthin' wrong? Do you want that I should call the doctah?"

"Where is he?"

"Whar is who, Miss Nannie? What you talkin' about?"

"He was here, I saw him, he was after me, oh, Beulah I tell you he was here."

"Aw, now, Miss Nannie, you been having those nightmares again."

Nannie's eyes lost their hysterical violet spark; she looked away from the troubled Beulah. The fire in the fireplace was dying slowly, the last flames dancing mincingly.

"Nightmare? This time? I wonder."

The End