

"Cups of Tea"

ELEANOR, a woman in her 90's, sits at a kitchen table, drinking a cup of tea. She wears a faded dressing gown. A place setting across from her contains the remains of tea and toast. It is early morning.

ELEANOR

Begin the day pouring my husband's tea as I have every morning since 1946. Then I cut off the top of his egg, butter his toast, and take my own breakfast through to the parlor and the television. Could swear I hear Cyril fiddling in the kitchen, but an hour later, when I come in to do the washing up, I see he's not touched his food. Tea's cold, the egg's gone all crusty, and the butter's congealed on his plate.

'Course right off I do a search of the house – hasn't got his hearing in this time of the morning, so it's no good shouting for him. Well, Eleanor, I say to myself, what you're seeing is sixty years of routine coming to a close. And the notion that maybe Cyril's gone for good starts creeping over me in a very unhappy manner. Then the doorbell goes. I answer it, and I am greeted by three lads in coveralls stamping their feet and blowing on their hands. And me with my one track mind, I say, "Have you brought him back to me?"

"Mrs. Slade? Eight o'clock?" one of them says.  
Beautiful hair.

"Yes!" I say. I always like to sound firm, but I'm not fully understanding what I'm saying yes to until I see the van behind them with "Movers" painted on the side, and light dawns in the wilderness.

(She chuckles)

"Yes we're the ones moving," I say. "Eight o'clock, right on time." With all the packing cases lying about, I can't think why I didn't realize earlier. Still, didn't help with the mystery surrounding Cyril. "Afraid my husband's disappeared on me," I say.

"He's at your new house," one of them says, "He said you'd stay here to give us a hand." Typical. Cyril's off gallivanting and I'm left holding the reins.

"Not one to stand in the way of progress," I say, "Let's get the first floor loaded," and I start in organizing. But before I get very far, one of them has escorted me up to the bedroom and told me I'd be warm and out of harm's way there. Lovely accent. Looked like Robert Donat.

"Thank you for looking out for me, Samuel," I say. I don't know why I called him Samuel. I knew his name wasn't Robert Donat.

"Not my name, miss," he says.

And I knew, but I couldn't seem to stop. "You're the one had the diphtheria after the war," I say.

"What war? Afghanistan?" he says, "I wasn't in the war."

"Sorry," I say, "sorry, sorry."

When the young man comes back to fetch me, I see three hours have passed. Couldn't tell you what I did with the time. Probably rubbish too boring for the brain to register.

We've had to move. The old place was just too big. What makes the move bearable at all is that after a long search, we found this bungalow half way down the road from our old house. Nice not having to meet a whole lot of new neighbors. A blessing, really, when you think about it. Which I do.

Oh, I know what I did. While I was waiting in the bedroom, I got my jumpers and blouses sorted out for St. Albans. A pile to keep and a pile to give a way. Sam helped me repack. Very nice about it.

Anyway, the movers get all our gear loaded and we drive down the street to the new house and here's Cyril chatting with that Mrs. Linden now our next door neighbor. The woman cannot leave him alone. Been pestering him for the last sixty odd. And he's drinking a mug of her tea.

"Cyril," I say, "where have you been?"

And calm as anything, he points to Mrs. Linden and asks me if I remember Mrs. Grove.

"Cyril," I say, "that's not Mrs. Grove, that's Heather Linden. And what kind of question is 'Do I remember her?' She's standing not two feet away."

I can see her give him that pitying look, which is to say she's sorry I'm so bossy.

"Right," Cyril says to the lads, "let's get the bedroom things unloaded first." And although this is very rude as we had not finished our conversation, I don't say anything.

"I've made floor plans for each room," Cyril is saying.

"Oh, Cyril," I say, "They don't need you to explain anything to them."

Heather takes me aside and wants to know if the move is tiring me.

I pull my arm away, "I'm not the one needs seeing to," I say. I look back at Cyril. The lads seem to be listening to whatever it is he's nattering on about.

"I could lend a hand," says she who's been eyeing my husband for the last sixty odd. "I could help," she says, "I've got a few extra hours."

"Lovely for you," I say. Rather a silent stand off until I remember that I've still got to go up to the old house and sort out my jumpers and blouses for St. Albans. Rather fun leaving Mrs. Linden speechless.

(pause)

New snow must have fallen. It's powder. I'm stepping very carefully. Powder, I've found, hides a multitude of sins. And it comes to me in a most unhappy manner that that was Mrs. Grove. I'll have to apologize to her although I doubt she'll understand what for.

Back in the empty house I do a final check 'round before leaving for good. I couldn't quite remember why I had popped back in, but I wasn't bothered as I suspect this

little loss of memory is due to the fact that the old house has got nothing to show for our years there.

The decorators got the house up in a new color the estate agent suggested, so there really is no evidence of us anymore. Oddest feeling – quite felt I was wandering 'round somebody else's place.

Must have lost track of time because when I get back to Cyril, the lads are well out. All that's left is for me to walk into a fait accompli.

Greeting party turns out to be Cyril sitting here drinking tea . . .

(ELEANOR indicates the place setting across from her.)

. . . undoubtedly made by Mrs. Linden. I mean, Mrs. Grove. Doesn't offer me any, so I move on and give the house an inspection tour.

Must say the movers didn't do half badly. Got the big things right and my room is lovely. A bit small, but oh the privacy! For the first time in ninety odd years.

(pause)

Mutual decision - separate rooms. When we first came with the estate agent, I said, "This room'll do for me," so Cyril took the other bedroom. Didn't talk about it, or I don't remember it if we did.

The first thing I do is unwrap the new sheets. Thing is, my system's a bit dodgy. Haven't told Cyril or our daughter Jill, of course, else there'd be endless whispered conversations. So the best thing is to say nothing and just get on best I can. which brings me back to sheets. Very funny to the touch, and I'm just about to put them on when I remember I had promised myself that before the move I'd go through and make a pile for St. Albans. So I pull out my cardigans and blouses – not as many as I thought I had – and pretty soon I've got my piles to keep and piles to give away and voila I'm settled enough to tackle the sheets again.

And a good thing too because I'm shattered. Much too tired to care about funny feeling sheets and the old spread

covers them nicely. In fact it all looks so inviting that I put my feet up just for a few moments, and before I know it, I am lights out to the world.

(ELEANOR rises and puts the dishes in the sink.)

Wish he'd wash up his things. Hasn't for the last sixty odd. Don't suppose that could be the thing that changes.

Oh, but let me say – since I have just slept six hours straight, which for me is quite a record – not having to crawl over Cyril in the middle of the night is a luxury the likes of which I had not thoroughly anticipated.

(END OF SCENE)