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NORMAN. What were you doing out there in the woods?

ETHEL. Getting kindling. *(She sets it on the hearth. She smiles at him, and then looks about the room.)* Just look at this place.

NORMAN. It's a mess, isn't it?

ETHEL. Not really. Just take a minute and it'll be all shipshape again. Come on. Help me with the dust covers. What's happened to the screen door?

NORMAN. It fell over.

ETHEL. How?

NORMAN. I pushed it.

ETHEL. What do you mean?

NORMAN. I pushed the door and the door fell over.

ETHEL. It's not supposed to do that when you push it.

NORMAN. I didn't think so. I'll fix it later.

ETHEL. You might have closed the big door.

NORMAN. Didn't want to touch it. I was afraid of what might happen.

ETHEL. Well, now we'll be swatting at black flies for the next two days. *(She closes the door.)* The room is probably full of them.

NORMAN. *(Looking about.)* I don't see any.

ETHEL. You *don't* see them till it's too late. *(She stares out the window.)* Of course they're never quite as bad on the lake side. Not when the wind blows. Whitecaps today.

NORMAN. Ah.

ETHEL. *(Crossing back down and beginning another dust cover.)* I met a very nice couple.

NORMAN. What? Where?

ETHEL. In the woods.

NORMAN. You met a couple in the woods? A couple of people? *(He is neatly folding his dust cover.)*

ETHEL. No, a couple of antelope. Of course a couple of people. You needn't be too careful with that. I'm going to hang them on the line anyway.

NORMAN. Oh. *(He thinks about it for a moment and then continues folding it.)* What were these people doing in the woods?

ETHEL. Walking. Their name was Melciorri, I think, or something.

NORMAN. Melciorri? What sort of name is that?

ETHEL. I don't know, dear. Italian, probably. They're up from Boston.

NORMAN. Ohhh. They speak English?

ETHEL. Tsk. Of course they speak English. How do you suppose

I talked to them? (*Lifting a dust cover.*) Here, help me with this. They're a very nice middle-aged couple. Just like us.

NORMAN. (*Dropping his own dust cover and taking an end of hers.*) If they're just like us, they're not middle-aged.

ETHEL. Of course they are.

NORMAN. Middle age means the middle, Ethel. The middle of life. People don't live to be 150.

ETHEL. We're at the far edge of middle age, that's all.

NORMAN. We're not, you know. We're not middle-aged. You're old, and I'm ancient.

ETHEL. Pooh. You're in your seventies and I'm in my sixties.

NORMAN. Just barely on both counts.

ETHEL. Are we going to spend the afternoon quibbling about this?

NORMAN. We can if you'd like.

ETHEL. (*Picking up another cover.*) The Melciorris, whatever their age group, are a nice couple, that's all. They're staying up at the Putnams', while the Putnams are in Europe.

NORMAN. Do the Putnams know about this?

ETHEL. Yes. They're the best of friends. That's what Mrs. Melciorri said.

NORMAN. Ha!

ETHEL. Oh, Lord. They've invited us for dinner, if we like.

NORMAN. Oh. Well. I'm not sure my stomach is ready for rigatoni and that sort of thing. Tiramisu.

ETHEL. We didn't discuss the menu. Want to help me with the rugs? Guess whom else I ran into.

NORMAN. You ran into someone else? The woods are full of people.

ETHEL. It was only Charlie.

NORMAN. Who's Charlie?

ETHEL. *Charlie.* The mailman.

NORMAN. Oh. What was Charlie the mailman doing in the woods?

ETHEL. He was on the road.

NORMAN. Oh. You went on the road, too. You didn't say that. You said you were in the woods. (*They unroll the rugs, Norman barely helping.*)

ETHEL. Well, the road goes through the woods, you know.

NORMAN. Of course it does.

ETHEL. Charlie wants to put in our dock.

NORMAN. What for?

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ETHEL. To park the boat beside.

NORMAN. I'll put in the dock.

ETHEL. You *won't* put in the dock.

NORMAN. Why not?

ETHEL. Because you're too old.

NORMAN. I'm not old at all. I'm middle-aged.

ETHEL. Old Pearson's been putting in the dock for God knows how long anyway, but he died this past winter, so Charlie has offered to do it, now that Pearson has received his just reward.

NORMAN. How did that come about?

ETHEL. I don't know. I suppose he got ill.

NORMAN. No, how did the subject of our dock come about?

ETHEL. We started talking about the dock because Charlie said it would be two more weeks before he'd start delivering the mail by boat, and he wanted to be sure we were okay. He must be the busiest man in the state of Maine.

NORMAN. I should think so. Certainly the dimmest-witted.

ETHEL. Norman. *(She finds a cloth and begins to dust.)*

NORMAN. I remember Charlie when he was just a little fellow.

ETHEL. Yes.

NORMAN. Little blond-haired kid. Used to laugh at anything. I thought then that he was a bit deficient. Charlie must be thirty by now.

ETHEL. Charlie is forty-four. Two years older than Chelsea.

NORMAN. Chelsea is forty-two? Our Chelsea?

ETHEL. 'Fraid so.

NORMAN. Good God. *(He stands by the door, studying the rack of hats. He takes down an old straw one and puts it on. He admires himself in a small mirror that hangs by the door. Ethel strains to lug a handcrafted antique table.)* What do you think?

ETHEL. Quite a sight.

NORMAN. I should say so. How's that table, a bit heavy?

ETHEL. *(Noting that he's not helping.)* Yes. My father built this table. It's practically as old as the house. *(She sets it by the couch.)*

NORMAN. Your father made that?

ETHEL. *(Slightly annoyed.)* Yes. The first summer I went to Camp Koochakiyi. *(Rhymes with Pooch-a-bye-bye. Norman replaces the hat and dons a new one, a floppy red fishing hat. He checks himself out again.)* Charlie says he doesn't expect Miss Appley to make it up this year.

NORMAN. Who is Miss Appley?

ETHEL. Miss *Appley*, Norman, who lives with Miss Tate.

NORMAN. Ohhh. How do you like this one?

ETHEL. Stunning. They're both in their nineties, I should think. They were up here together when I was a teenager. Wearing their neckties and singing in the gazebo, holding hands. What a marvelous love affair. Can you imagine being together for so long?

NORMAN. No.

ETHEL. *(She throws the pile of dust clothes into the kitchen.)* Thanks a lot. Charlie says Miss *Appley* is just too frail, and Miss Tate won't come without her. One of them has a nephew, I believe, who'll get the house. It's sad, isn't it? *(She bends over and retrieves a wooden doll that has fallen onto the hearth.)* Oh, poor Elmer has had a terrible fall.

NORMAN. Who's poor Elmer?

ETHEL. *Elmer.* *(She holds up the doll.)* My doll. He fell in the fireplace.

NORMAN. Oh.

ETHEL. Poor little Elmer. The life you've had. *(To Norman.)* Did you know he turned sixty-five this spring?

NORMAN. No, I must say I wasn't aware of that.

ETHEL. I got him on my fourth birthday. I remember it quite clearly. I wanted a red scooter, but my father said red scooters were excessive and contrary to the ways of the Lord. He told me I'd understand when I was older. I'm a *lot* older now, and I'm afraid I still don't understand. But, he gave me Elmer. And Elmer and I became the best of friends. The times we had. He was my first true love, you know.

NORMAN. There's no real need for you to review the vagaries of your youth. I've realized all along that I wasn't the first in line.

ETHEL. No, you were a rather cheap substitute for my darling Elmer. Sixty-five years old. It's hard to think of a doll as being old. He doesn't look much different than he did. A bit faded perhaps. He'd still be a delight to a small child. Chelsea used to love him. And now he's had a fall, poor dear.

NORMAN. Maybe he was trying to kill himself. Maybe he wants to be cremated. Probably got cancer or termites or something.

ETHEL. Would you please shut up? I swear you get more morbid every year.

NORMAN. Well, it wouldn't be a bad way to go, huh? A quick front flip off the mantel, a bit of a kick at the last minute, and land right in the fire. Nothing to it.

ETHEL. Are you hungry, Norman?

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