

## The Twins' House

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You know how it is on some Sunday afternoons in the fall: you are so desperately bored and lonely that you feel that all you can do is take a drive somewhere, anywhere. After a couple of hours of meandering, you find yourself in one of those villages built by and for people with too much money: a rich American's concept of a medieval European village in the mountains, with quaint, winding streets and little storybook shops, all of it too clean and proper for words. But on a cold fall afternoon, when you're at the end of your rope, the tiny little orange-glowing windows of the restaurants are irresistible, and so you park your car and allow yourself to go inside.

You take a seat at the bar, which is of heavy, polished wood that looks like it has been there for centuries, and you order a glass of wine. A prosperous-looking middle-aged guy is on the next stool: mustache, pot belly, watch chain hanging across his vest. He is handsome in a country squire way. You get to talking. He says he is waiting for his group to arrive. Who they are, or what the occasion is, he doesn't say. When you remark, during the course of conversation, that you are interested in architecture, he asks if you would like to come along — the group is going to visit a couple who live in a remarkable house on top of a nearby ridge. Of course, you say yes.

His group turns out to be a rather loud, laughing, collection of about a dozen young-looking middle-aged people, including several attractive women who have already had too much to drink. After the usual excess of upper-middle-class hugs and cheek-to-cheek busses, they all sweep out into the street, pile into various cars and drive off. You follow. At the end of the village, the road enters a barren grassland, and begins climbing the side of a ridge. The road gets narrower as it winds upward, until it finally becomes a bumpy, long, unpaved driveway. Ahead, at the top of the ridge, is a huge white house with black Tudor beams. A round tower rises from the center. The impression is of something that would have been modern in the 1930s.

Everyone climbs out of the cars and stands around, oohing and ahhhing over the view. Farther down the grassy slope are the beginnings of another house; only the foundation had been completed; there are a few stacks of boards partially covered by dusty, black tarpaulins. Below, the slope steepens, you can see a few shrubs and bushes here and there, then a shiny ribbon of river in the valley far below. Someone comments how the wooded valley, which continues as far as the eye can see, apparently contains not a single house (but it immediately becomes clear that some people know otherwise).

There is a little arched entrance-way leading to the front door; the upper half of the two sides are open, as though to give you a last look at the view along the ridge before you enter the house. The front door is stained wood with an engraved brass handle. You and the others go inside.

The immediate, overwhelming impression you get is: *white*. White walls, white ceiling, white carpet, even some of the furniture — all of it obviously very expensive — is white, except that there is a horizontal black stripe on one wall, about five feet from the floor, and running to what appears to be a stairwell at the right-hand side of the other end of the room. It strikes you that the room you are in is way too small, and rather odd, because, for one thing, you find out that the wall to the left of the stairwell, is just a barrier — a *faux* wall, you suppose architects would call it — with the real wall a couple of feet behind it. In front of this fake wall is an ashtray mounted on the end of a long vertical rod.

Oddly conspicuous in front of the left-hand wall of the room is a maroon, canvas-bottomed chair with carved wood legs and brass feet. It gives you the impression of an ordinary, even cheap, item of furniture that has been re-rendered by one of the world's leading furniture designers. This left-hand wall is almost entirely taken up by a big window which provides a view up the ridge: not a particularly exciting view, you think, since it is just brown grass with occasional bushes and oak trees. The window, too, is a little odd, since it consists of mere sliding plates of

glass, with no smaller panes, much less curtains, to soften its abstractness.

In front of the right-hand wall is what you might have called a teenager's bureau, except the wood looks antique and beautifully finished. Above it is a mirror with a carved wooden frame.

As soon as you and the others are inside the room, those in front are embraced and exclaimed over by people who apparently have been waiting for just that opportunity. Then everyone more or less *flows* toward the back of the room, then down the stairway. The women who are wearing heels make a big fuss about how difficult it is to have to go down such steps. They hold onto the bannister with one hand and hold up the other hand with fingers in an elegant O, as beautiful women who have drunk too much, tend to do under such circumstances. You notice that the black stripe runs down the wall on the right of the stairway.

In the room at the bottom of the stairs, on the right, is a long bar, on the left is more plate glass and more of the view along the ridge, except that this must now be the *back* of the ridge; you are able to see the lower parts of the house, which is an immense structure, roofs below roofs of Spanish tile. This view is not as splendid as the one from upstairs because it is a view of the rear of buildings, which may be why persons sitting at the bar face the other way. (There are a few people sitting at the bar, but you are not sure if they are belong to the party you are with.) The black stripe runs along between the lower and upper cabinets for drinks behind the bar and disappears down a stairwell at the far end of the room.

The guy you met at the village restaurant is nowhere in sight. You order a drink and decide to see what is down the next stairwell. You emerge into a room filled with comfortable tables and chairs, clearly intended for people who have brought their drinks down from the bar. You sit down at one.

After a while, a woman comes into the room and sits down at your table without looking at you. She is holding a glass in a napkin. She seems to have selected your table at random in order to sit down and think about something. You get the impression she has not noticed you at all. She has long blond hair, a tasteful beige sweater, big golden earrings, and a plain gold bracelet on her left wrist. A classy lady, you think to yourself, although the hair style may be just a little too young for her, a little too much of the beautiful young girl in a woman who, though very attractive, is no longer a young girl. And, you notice, she is wearing gloves — expensive-looking beige gloves.

Well, there you are, two people sitting at a round polished table while other people are swirling past and talking excitedly, and the two of you with no view to look at. So you wait for your eyes to meet (it is only a matter of time). When they do, you say, "This is an amazing house!"

"Yes, it is," she says, not looking at you.

"Do you happen to know who designed it?" you ask.

"They designed it themselves!" she says, looking at you for the first time, clearly surprised that you didn't know this.

"Who is 'they'?" you ask.

"The twins! Aren't you —?"

"I'm afraid I don't know anyone here," you explain. "I was having a drink at one of the restaurants in the village, and this guy just invited me up. I had told him I was interested in architecture."

"Oh, my," she says. "Well, you must meet the twins. Here, come with me."

She leads you down a hall at the far end of the room, past a series of doors, then abruptly opens one. More white walls — Spanish stucco walls — and a white carpet with a thin black stripe running around it.. Two walls have large windows, giving you that view again of Spanish

tile roofs. And standing at the far end of the room are two couples, talking. One of them immediately attracts your attention. Both are wearing white, he with a black stripe along the edge of the collar of his sports jacket, she with a black stripe along the border of her appealingly short skirt. He has black hair, slicked down, parted in the middle. Both have the looks of Hollywood actors. They might be of any age from the early thirties to late forties, beauty like theirs being, as we all know, free of time's depredations. She has a youthful, sparkling-eyed look, with short black hair swept back, boyish, with a little wave in front.

The blonde — who has not given you her name, nor have you given her yours, for that matter — takes your hand in her gloved hand and waits for the other couple to leave. Then she says, “Here, you two: someone you haven't met yet. This is —”, and she looks at you, waiting.

You give your name.

“And these,” she says, while you are already in the process of extending your hand and making eye contact and smiling “are our beloved twins: Carver” — she nods toward the man, “and Garba”, nodding toward the woman.

Garba looks directly into your eyes with those lovely black sparkling eyes of hers as you shake her hand. But she does it, you think, in a little too practiced a way — a little too much like the model who is hired by Marketing to sell the computer product. You wait for the affected overpronunciation of *s*'s, that little whistle which such women use, like clinking earrings or bracelets, to keep you reminded of their presence, but it does not come. Her speech is young and warm and not in the slightest sense haughty.

“This house is just incredible,” you say, and then, realizing that “incredible” might sound like a synonym for “bizarre”, you quickly add, “ — just beautiful.”

“Well, thank you!” she says. Her brother is beaming at you, every once in a while raising a hand to wave a few fingers at a passing guest. “Yes, we like it,” she says.

“You designed it, I understand,” you say.

“Yes, together. We had never done anything like it before. It was fun. A lot of work, but fun.”

“Did you have the help of an architect — I mean another architect beside yourselves?” (You know it is a lame recovery, but they seem to enjoy it.)

“Oh yes. Yes. Several. They were very helpful.”

“It seems enormous!” you say. “How many of you are living here — I don't mean how many twins (you laugh, they smile), but how many people altogether?”

“Oh, well, let's see,” she begins. “There's the gardener — he lives down on the first floor with his wife. Then there's the cook and her husband, who live on the second floor. And, let me see — there's Arlene, our half-sister who lives in the annex. And, let's see — she looks at her brother — did I leave anyone out, darling?”

“Well, Brewster, when he's around,” he laughs.

“Oh, yes: Brewster. He's an old friend. Comes and goes. Doesn't have much money, so we put him up.”

“I see,” you say. “Well, they all have magnificent views, I imagine — I mean, no matter where their rooms are.”

“Yes, we hope so!” says Garba. “That's the main reason why we chose this site.”

“Doesn't get too windy, does it?” you ask.

“Oh, sometimes, in the fall and winter. But the place is aerodynamically designed. In fact, if it weren't fastened to the ground —” and she can't control her sudden laughter. Her brother finished her sentence for her — “it would take off. Like a 707.”

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"I see," you say again. "But wouldn't it be better if it *landed* like a 707? I mean, the upward stresses and everything..."

"No, no," she smiles. "We liked it better the other way."

"Better lift than drag," her brother puts in.

"I see," you say. You want to ask them why they made the rooms so small, at least the ones in this part of the building, but you are afraid they would be offended by the question.

During all this, the blonde is standing on your left, listening and watching attentively. You feel that the conversation is at an end, so you say, "Well, I think I'll get a refill. It was a pleasure meeting you both." You shake hands with each of them in turn.

"Nice having you!" says Garba, cheerily.

The blonde falls into step beside you as you make your way back to the room where you first met her.

"Nice couple," you say. "I mean, nice pair of twins. I mean..."

"I understand," she says. "And in case you're wondering, yes, there are rumors that they ..."

"I understand," you say. "I'm not surprised. Physical beauty writes its own rules."

You and she go back up to the bar, where you order another glass of white wine. She has her vodka tonic re-filled. The two of you go back down the steps. The room is now only occupied by three or four people. You sit down.

"I'm still curious about this place," you say. "There's something weird about it. It's not real."

"What do you mean?", she responds, taking a sip of her drink. Her manner toward you is cordial yet distant. As though she knows the two of you will only know each other as ships that pass. You are surprised that, in spite of her beauty, you feel so little sexual desire for her.

"Well," you continue, "the way their clothes match the exterior of the house. That's not real. Who dresses to match their house?"

"But all their clothes are that way!", she says, leaning forward as though surprised again that you don't know something so well-known. "Even their underwear — so people say. Their towels, tablecloths, bedsheets, comforters — all white with that little black stripe around."

"Why?" you ask.

"You don't know!" she exclaims, looking directly at you.

"No, I don't. What is it: some kind of symbol or something?"

But now her mouth is at the edge of her glass again, and she makes no reply, as though by way of saying, loud and clear, You bet it's some kind of symbol!

"Tell me," you say.

She gives a toss of her hair in the way that beautiful women do when they are feeling particularly superior to the person they are with. "I think we'd better go."

You are at your wits' end. "How do you mean, 'we'? And why? I want to see some more of this place before I go."

"All right, I'll tell you what," she says. "You look around. I have to talk to some friends. Perhaps we'll meet again later."

You think, What a strange person! You say, "Fine."

You notice, for the first, time, that there is a stairwell in this room, too. You go down it: white walls, round wooden bannister with brass supports in the wall, the black stripe.. After a turn or two, the stairs emerge onto a floor, much like the one above, with a plate glass window and corridor running along it, but, of course, it is closer to the ground. Below — perhaps two or three stories — is what looks like a garage area, trees on the left, and snow! There hadn't been snow on any of the surrounding mountains — after all, this was not the Sierras — but suddenly it is as

though you are in the back of a hotel in a winter resort. You can easily imagine a small tractor-snowplow down there in the court, with a garage full of snowshovels and chains.

Where is the blonde? Do you want to wait for her? You decide to go outside, walk around in that garage space, get a breath of fresh air, talk to a workman or servant, then go home. You go down the next flight of stairs, which is identical to the previous flight: square black support rods, round wood to hold on to, brass fittings connecting the whole thing to the wall, black stripe. The sounds of the party are far above you now. You listen for sounds of maintenance: floor polisher, washing machine, scraping, hammering, water running. Nothing. You hear a few foreign-sounding syllables, Spanish perhaps, from a distant room which has an echo. Where is all the help, for Christ sake? Where is the furnace room? Then voices again, with the unmistakable inflections of servants talking unselfconsciously among themselves when the master and mistress are gone. You imagine a pair of hands holding up a dripping wet shirt or nightgown, while the person's full attention is concentrated on some trivial matter he or she is discussing with someone else.

"Hello!" you call out. "Anyone here?" The sound of running water stops. It is followed by the sound of servants listening. "Hello!" you call again.

"Yes?" replies a voice from the same echoey room.

"How do I get outside?" you call out to the walls.

There is the sound of someone putting something down and wiping their hands. "Why you want to go outside?" Then down the corridor comes a short Mexican with black, neatly combed hair.

"I just want to step outside, take a walk, grab a breath of fresh air."

"You no go outside," he says firmly. You catch a glint of gold from his teeth.

"Why not?"

"No allow."

"Why not? Just for some air? I'm not going to steal anything."

"You want air, I open window." and he crosses in front of you and pushes open two of the windows.

Well, just to make him feel bad, you stick your head into the opening, make a pretence of gulping lungfuls of air. He stands watching you, waiting for you to finish.

"This is rather an odd house", you say, turning to him.

"*Che?*"

"The house: it's rather odd. Strange."

"Ees their house", he says, assuming no doubt that even a visitor would know who *they* are.

"It matches their clothes", you say.

"You finish with air?" he asks.

"Yes, of course. Thank you very much. It was very good air. Nice and fresh."

He doesn't catch your sarcasm, but marches directly stepped to the windows and pulls them closed and secures the latches firmly. Then he steps back to his former position, obviously hoping you will leave.

"Well", you say, "I'm waiting for someone. Don't quite know what to do. You'd like me to leave, I suppose. I'd be glad to leave if you'd let me go out the back and take a look at the view. You could accompany me to make sure I don't steal anything. How's that?"

"No allow," he says.

The boredom is getting to you. The whole adventure is getting to you. You decide to do something about it. You suddenly run down the corridor in the direction he had come from.

"Hey!" he calls out. "You no go there!"

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You run past closed doors and half-open doors. Smell of laundry soap. Smell of rubber hoses. Sound of quiet things being done by abstracted people. Smell of basement. Black stripe along the wall. Directly at the end of the corridor, you can see a door with daylight showing through its glass panes. Thank God for normal window panes! you think. You reach it, turn the handle, pull the door open and catch yourself just in time, because there are no stairs. Instead there is a good fifteen-foot drop to the tarmac below. You turn to the Mexican, who has been racing up behind you.

“What the fuck kind of a door is this?” you shout at him. “What are you trying to do, kill people? What kind of bullshit is this?”

“You no go out there!” he shouts.

“I’ll say!” you answer him.

Holding on to the door frame, you lean out the door opening, look at the white walls at the back of the house. Then you pull your head back inside, notice the black stripe along the wall, which ends right at the door frame. A bizarre explanation occurs to you, you say aloud, “That must be it”, and push your way past the Mexican. You walk back up the corridor, go up the stairwells, search through the crowd for the blonde. When you find her, you tell her your theory. She smiles, and the two of you agree to drive to the village in your separate cars and meet for dinner.