

In These High, Green Hills -1st Chapter

Through the Hedge

He stood at the kitchen window and watched her coming through the hedge.

What was she lugging this time? It appeared to be a bowl and pitcher. Or was it a stack of books topped by a vase?

The rector took off his glasses, fogged them, and wiped them with his handkerchief. It was a bowl and pitcher, all right. How the little yellow house next door had contained all the stuff they'd recently muscled into the rectory was beyond him.

"For your dresser," she said, as he held the door open.

"Aha!"

The last thing he wanted was a bowl and pitcher on his dresser. The top of his dresser was his touchstone, his home base, his rock in a sea of change. That was where his car keys resided, his loose coins, his several crosses, his cufflinks, his wallet, his checkbook, his school ring, and a small jar of buttons with a needle and thread.

It was also where he kept the mirror in which he occasionally examined the top of his head. Was his hair still thinning, or, by some mysterious and hoped-for reversal, growing in again?

"Cynthia," he said, going upstairs in the wake of his blond and shapely wife, "about that bowl and pitcher . . ."

"The color is wonderful. Look at the blues. It will relieve all your burgundy and brown!"

He did not want his burgundy and brown relieved.

He saw it coming.

Ever since their marriage on September seventh, she had plotted to lug that blasted armoire over for the rectory guest room.

The lugging over was one thing; it was the lugging back that he dreaded. They had, for example, lugged over an oriental rug that was stored in her basement. "Ten by twelve!" she announced, declaring it perfect for the bare floor of the rectory dining room.

After wrestling the table and chairs into the hall, they had unrolled the rug and unrolled the rug-to kingdom come. It might have gone up the walls on all four sides and met at the chandelier over the table.

"This is a rug for a school gym!" he said, wiping the pouring sweat from his brow.

She seemed dumbfounded that it didn't fit, and there they had gone, like pack mules, carting it through the hedge again.

The decision to keep and use both houses had been brilliant, of course. The light in the rectory would never equal that of her studio next door, where she was already set up with books and paints and drawing board. This meant his study could remain unchanged-his books could occupy the same shelves, and his vast store of sermon notebooks in the built-in cabinets could hold their place.

Marrying for the first time at the age of sixtysomething was change enough. It was a blessed luxury to live with so few rearrangements in the scheme of things, and life flowing on as usual. The only real change was the welcome sharing of bed and board.

Over breakfast one morning, he dared to discuss his interest in getting the furniture settled.

"Why can't we keep things as they were . . . in their existing state? It seemed to work. . . ."

"Yes, well, I like that our houses are separate, but I also want them to be the same-sort of an organic whole."

"No organic whole will come of dragging that armoire back and forth through the hedge. It looks like a herd of elephants has passed through there already."

"Oh, Timothy! Stop being stuffy! Your place needs fluffing up, and mine needs a bit more reserve. For example, your Chippendale chairs would give a certain sobriety to my dining table."

"Your dining table is the size of something in our nursery school. My chairs would look gigantic."

She said exactly what he thought she would say. "We could try it and see."

"Cynthia, trust me on this. My chairs will not look right with your table, and neither will that hand-painted magazine rack do anything for my armchair."

"Well, what was the use of getting married, then?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean, if no one is going to change on either side, if we're both just going to be our regular, lifetime selves, what's the use?"

"I think I see what you're getting at. Will nothing do, then, but to cart those chairs to your house? And what about my own table? It will be bereft of chairs. I hardly see the point." He felt like jumping through the window and going at a dead run toward the state line.

"One thing at a time," she said happily. "It's all going to work out perfectly."

deAr stuart,

thanx for your note re: diocesan mtg, and thank martha for the invitation to put my feet under yr table afterward, however, I must leave for home at once, following the mtg-hope you'll understand.

while i'm at it, let me ask you:

why are women always moving things around? at Sunday School, jena iivey just had the youth group move the kindergarten bookcases to a facing wall.

on the homefront, my househelp has moved a ladderback chair from my bedroom into the hall, never once considering that i hung my trousers over it for 14 years, and put my shoes on the seat so they could be found in an emergency.

last but certainly not least, if C could lift me in my armchair and put it by the window while i'm dozing, she would do it.

without a doubt, you have weightier things to consider, but tell me, how does one deal with this?

i hasten to add that ii've never been happier in my life, to tell the truth, i am confounded that such happiness-in such measure-even exists.

He signed the note, typed on his Royal manual, thankful that Stuart Cullen was not merely his bishop, but his closest personal friend since the halcyon days of seminary.

Fr Timothy Kavanagh,

The Chapel of Our Lord and Savior

Old Church Lane, Mitford, N.C.

Dear Timothy:

In truth, it is disconcerting when one's househelp, SS supervisor, and wife do this sort of thing all at once.

My advice is: do not fight it. It will wear off.

In His peace,

Stuart

P.S. Martha would add a note, but she is busy moving my chest of drawers to the far side of our bedroom. As I am dealing with an urgent matter with the House of Bishops, I could not

be browbeaten to help, and so she has maneuvered it, at last, onto an old bedspread, and I can hear her hauling the whole thing across the floor above me. This particular behavior had lain dormant in her for nearly seven years, and has suddenly broken forth again.

Perhaps it is something in the water.

He could see, early on, that beds were a problem that needed working out.

They had spent their wedding night in his bed at the rectory, where they had rolled down their respective sides and crashed together in the middle.

"What is this trough doing in your bed?" she asked.

"It's where I sleep," he said, feeling sheepish.

They had been squeezed together like sardines the livelong night, which he had profoundly enjoyed, but she had not. "Do you think this is what's meant by 'the two shall be one flesh?'" she murmured, her cheek smashed against his.

The following night, he trooped through the hedge with his pajamas and toothpaste in a grocery bag from The Local.

Her bed was a super-king-size, and the largest piece of furniture in her minuscule house.

He found it similar in breadth to the state of Texas, or possibly the province of Saskatchewan. Was that a herd of buffalo racing toward him in the distance, or a team of sled dogs? "Cynthia!" he shouted across the vast expanse, and waited for the echo.

They had ordered a new mattress for the rectory immediately after returning from their honeymoon in Stuart Cullen's summer house. There, on the rocky coast of Maine, they had spent time listening to the cry of the loons, holding hands, walking along the shore, and talking until the small hours of the morning. The sun turned her fair skin a pale toast color that he found fascinating and remarkable; and he watched three freckles emerge on the bridge of her nose, like stars coming out. Whatever simple thing they did together, they knew they were happier than ever before in their lives.

One evening, soon after the new mattress and springs were installed at the rectory, he found her sitting up in bed as he came out of the shower.

"I've had a wonderful idea, Timothy! A fireplace! Right over there where the dresser is."

"What would I do with my dresser?"

She looked at him as if he had toddled in from the church nursery. "Put it in the alcove, of course."

"Then I couldn't see out the window."

"But how much time do you spend staring out the alcove window?"

"When you were parading about with Andrew Gregory, a great deal of time." His face burned to admit it, but yes, he'd been jealous of the handsome antique dealer who had squired her around for several months.

She smiled, leaning her head to one side in that way he could barely resist. "A fireplace would be so romantic."

"Ummm."

"Why must I be the romantic in the family while you hold up the conservative, let's-don't-make-any-changes end?"

He sat down beside her. "How quickly you forget. When we were going steady, you said I was wildly romantic."

She laughed and kissed him on the cheek. "And I was right, of course. I'm sorry, old dearest."

He regretted being anyone's old dearest.

"Old dearest, yourself," he said grumpily. "I am, after all, only six years your senior."

"By the calendar," she said imperiously, referring, he supposed, to something decrepit in his overall attitude about life.

In any case, the fireplace issue did not come up again.

In truth, he had no words for his happiness. It grew deeper every day, like the digging of a well, and astounded him by its warmth and power. He seemed to lose control of his very face, which, according to the regulars at the Main Street Grill, displayed a foolish and perpetual grin.

"I love you . . . terribly," he said, struggling to express it.

"I love you terribly, also. It's scary. What if it should end?"

"Cynthia, good grief . . ."

"I know I shouldn't talk of endings when this is a blessed beginning."

"Don't then," he said, meaning it.

That Barnabas had so willingly given up the foot of his master's bed to sleep on a rug in the hall was a gesture he would never forget. Not only did his dog enjoy eighteenth-century poets and submit to his weekly bath without rancor, his dog was a gentleman.

The decisions were made, and both parties were in amicable accord.

They would sleep at the rectory primarily, and on occasion at the little yellow house. Though she would work there, as always, they would treat it much as a second home, using it for refreshment and private retreat.

He promised to have his sermon well under control each Saturday afternoon, with time to relax with her on Saturday evening, and he would continue to make breakfast on Sunday morning.

He showed her where his will was, and promised to have it rewritten. She confessed she didn't have a will, and promised to have one drawn up.

If they should ever, God forbid, have a misunderstanding, neither would dash off to the other house to sulk.

He would continue to have the cheerful and enterprising Puny Guthrie, née Bradshaw, clean the rectory three days a week, and Cynthia would use her services on a fourth day, next door.

They would go on with their separate checking accounts, make some mutual investments, counsel with the other about gift offerings, and never spend more than a certain fixed sum without the other's prior agreement.

He suggested fifty dollars as the fixed sum.

"One hundred!" she countered.

He was glad he had opened the bidding low. "One hundred, then, and I keep that old jacket you earmarked for the Bane and Blessing sale."

"Done!"

They laughed.

They shook hands.

They felt relieved.

Getting a marriage off on the right foot was no small matter.

"I reckon you're gone with th' wind," said Percy Mosely, who rang up his lunch tab at the Main Street Grill.

"How's that?" asked the rector.

"Married an' all, you'll not be comin' in regular, I take it." The proprietor of the Grill felt hurt and betrayed, he could tell.

"You've got that wrong, my friend."

"I do?" said Percy, brightening.

"I'll be coming in as regular as any man could. My wife has a working life of her own, being a well-known children's book writer and illustrator. She will not be trotting out hot vittles for my lunch every day-not by a long shot."

Percy looked suspicious. "What about breakfast?"

"That," said the rector, pocketing the change, "is another matter entirely."

Percy frowned. He liked his regulars to be married to his place of business.

He looked up from his chair in the study. Curlers, again.

"I have to wear curlers," she said, as if reading his mind. "I'm going to Lowell tomorrow."

"Lowell? Whatever for?"

"A school thing. They want me to read Violet Goes to France to their French class, and then do a program in the auditorium."

"Must you?"

"Must I what? Read Violet Goes to France? That's what they asked me to read."

"No, must you go to Lowell?"

"Well, yes."

He didn't want to say anything so idiotic, but he would miss her, as if she were being dropped off the end of the earth.

A long silence ensued as she curled up on the sofa and opened a magazine. He tried to read, but couldn't concentrate.

He hadn't once thought of her traveling with her work. Uneasy, he tried to let the news sink in. Lowell. Somebody there had been shot on the street in broad daylight.

And another thing-Lowell was a full hundred miles away. Did she have good brakes? Plenty of gas? When had she changed her oil?

"How's your oil?" he asked soberly.

She laughed as if he'd said something hilariously funny. Then she left the sofa and came to him and kissed him on the forehead. He was instantly zapped by the scent of wisteria, and went weak in the knees.

She looked him in the eye. "I love it when you talk like that. My oil is fine, how's yours?"

"Cynthia, Cynthia," he said, pulling her into his lap.

"Guess what?" said Emma, who was taping a photo of her new grandchild on the wall next to her desk.

This was his secretary's favorite game, and one he frankly despised. "What?"

"Guess!"

"Let's see. You're going to quit working for the Episcopalians and go to work for the Baptists." He wished.

"I wish," she said, rolling her eyes. "Try again."

"Blast, Emma, I hate this game."

"It's good for you, it exercises the brain."

"Esther Bolick's orange marmalade cake recipe is coming out in the New York Times food section."

"See? You don't even try. You're just talking to hear your head roar. One more guess."

"Give me a clue."

"It has to do with somebody being mad."

"The vestry. It must have something to do with the vestry."

"Wrong. Do you want me to tell you?"

"I beg you."

"Marge Wheeler left her best basket in the kitchen after the bishop's brunch last June, and Flora Lou Wilcox put it in the Bane and Blessing sale. Somebody walked off with it for a hundred dollars! Can you believe a hundred dollars for a basket with a loose handle? Marge is mad as a wet hen, she threatened to sue. But Flora Lou said she doesn't have a leg to stand on, since you're always running notices in the pew bulletin to pick up stuff left in th' kitchen."

"Ummm. Keep me posted."

"It's been four months since the brunch, so I can see Flora Lou's point that Marge should have picked it up and carted it home. Anyway, how could Flora Lou know it was handmade by Navajo Indians in 1920?" Emma sighed. "Of course, I can see Marge's point, too, can't you?"

He could, but he knew better than to intervene unless asked. His job, after all, was Sales and Service.

He rifled through the mail. A note from his cousin, Walter, and wife, Katherine, who had done the Ireland jaunt with him last year.

Dear Timothy:

Since Ireland is now old stomping grounds, why don't you and Cynthia plan to go with us next summer? Thought we'd plant the seed, so it can sprout over the winter.

We shall never forget how handsome you looked on the other side of the pulpit, standing with your beautiful bride. We love her as much as we love you, which is pecks and bushels, as ever,

Katherine

PS, Pls advise if canna and lily bulbs should be separated in the fall, I'm trying to find a hobby that has nothing to do with a pasta machine

Yrs, Walter

He rummaged toward the bottom of the mail stack.

Aha!

A note from Dooley Barlowe, in that fancy prep school for which his eldest parishioner, Miss Sadie Baxter, was shelling out serious bucks.

Hey. I don't like it here. That brain in a jar that we saw is from a medical school. I still don't know whose brain it is. When are you coming back? Bring Barnbus and granpaw and Cynthia. I culd probly use a twenty.

Dooley

There! Not one "ain't," and complete sentences throughout. Hallelujah!

Who could have imagined that this boy, once barely able to speak the King's English, would end up in a prestigious school in Virginia?

He gazed at the note, shaking his head.

Scarcely more than two years ago, Dooley Barlowe had arrived at the church office, dirty, ragged, and barefoot, looking for a place to "take a dump." His grandfather had been too ill to care for the boy, who was abandoned by a runaway father and alcoholic mother, and Dooley had ended up at the rectory. By grace alone, he and Dooley had managed to live through those perilous times.

"I've been wondering," said Emma, peering at him over her glasses. "Is Cynthia goin' to pitch in and help around the church?"

"She's free to do as much or as little as she pleases."

"I've always thought a preacher's wife should pitch in." She set her mouth in that way he deplored. "If you ask me, which you didn't, the parish will expect it."

Yes, indeed, if he could get the Baptists to take Emma Newland off his hands, he would be a happy man.

"Miss Sadie," he said when she answered the phone at Fernbank, "I've had a note from Dooley. He says he doesn't like it in that fancy school."

"He can like it or lump it," she said pleasantly.

"When you're dishing out twenty thousand a year, you sure can be tough, Miss Sadie."

"If I couldn't be tough, Father, I wouldn't have twenty thousand to dish out."

"You'll be glad to know the headmaster says he's doing all right. A little slow on the uptake, but holding his own with those rich kids. In fact, they're not all rich. Several are there on scholarship, with no more assets than our Dooley."

"Good! You mark my words, he'll be better for it. And don't you go soft on me, Father, and let him talk you into bailing him out in the middle of the night."

"You can count on it," he said.

"Louella and I have nearly recovered from all the doings in June. . . ."

"June was a whopper, all right."

"We're no spring chickens, you know."

"You could have fooled me."

"I'll be ninety my next birthday, but Louella doesn't tell her age. Anyway, we're going to have you and Cynthia up for supper. What did we say we'd have, Louella?"

He heard Louella's mezzo voice boom from a corner of the big kitchen, "Fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, an' cole slaw!"

"Man!" he exclaimed, quoting Dooley.

The announcement rolled on. "Hot biscuits, cooked apples, deviled eggs, bread and butter pickles . . ."

Good Lord! The flare-up from his diabetes would have him in the emergency room before the rest of them pushed back from the table.

"And what did we say for dessert?" Miss Sadie warbled into the distance.

"Homemade coconut cake!"

Ah, well, that was a full coma right there. Hardly any of his parishioners could remember he had this blasted disease. The information seemed to go in one ear and out the other.

"Ask Louella if she'll marry me," he said.

"Louella, the Father wants to know if you'll marry him."

"Tell 'im he got a short mem'ry, he done married Miss Cynthia."

He laughed, contented with the sweetness of this old friendship. "Just name the time," he said. "We'll be there."

Autumn drew on in the mountains.

Here, it set red maples on fire; there, it turned oaks russet and yellow. Fat persimmons became the color of melted gold, waiting for frost to turn their bitter flesh to honey. Sassafras, dogwoods, poplars, redbud—all were torched by autumn's brazen fire, displaying their colorful tapestry along every ridge and hogback, in every cove and gorge.

The line of maples that marched by First Baptist to Winnie Ivey's cottage on Little Mitford Creek was fully ablaze by the eleventh of October.

"The best ever!" said several villagers, who ran with their cameras to document the show.

The local newspaper editor, J. C. Hogan, shot an extravagant total of six rolls of film. For the first time since the nation's bicentennial, readers saw a four-color photograph on the front page of the Mitford Muse.

Everywhere, the pace was quickened by the dazzling light that now slanted from the direction of Gabriel Mountain, and the sounds of football practice in the schoolyard.

Avis Packard put a banner over the green awning of The Local: Fresh Valley Hams Now, Collards Coming.

Dora Pugh laid on a new window at the hardware store featuring leaf rakes, bicycle pumps, live rabbits, and iron skillet. "What's th' theme of your window?" someone asked. "Life," replied Dora.

The library introduced its fall reading program and invited the author of the Violet books to talk about where she got her ideas. "I have no idea where I get my ideas," she told Avette

Harris, the librarian. "They just come." "Well, then," said Avette, "do you have any ideas for another topic?"

The village churches agreed to have this year's All-Church Thanksgiving Feast with the Episcopalians, and to get their youth choirs together for a Christmas performance at First Presbyterian.

At Lord's Chapel, the arrangements on the altar became gourds and pumpkins, accented by branches of the fiery red maple. At this time of year, the rector himself liked doing the floral offerings. He admitted it was a favorite season, and his preaching, someone remarked, grew as electrified as the sharp, clean air.

"Take them," he said one Sunday morning, lifting the cup and the Host toward the people, "in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on Him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving."

Giving his own wife the Host was an act that might never cease to move and amaze him. More than sixty years a bachelor, and now this-seeing her face looking up expectantly, and feeling the warmth of her hand as he placed the bread in her palm. "The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for you, Cynthia."

He couldn't help but see the patch of colored light that fell on her hair through the stained-glass window by the rail, as if she were being appointed to something divine. Surely there could be no divinity in having to live the rest of her life with him, with his set-in-concrete ways and infernal diabetes.

They walked home together after church, hand in hand, his sermon notebook tucked under his arm. He felt as free as a schoolboy, as light as air. How could he ever have earned God's love, and hers into the bargain?

The point was, he couldn't. It was all grace, and grace alone.

He was sitting in his armchair by the fireplace, reading the newspaper. Barnabas ambled in from the kitchen and sprawled at his feet.

Cynthia, barefoot and in her favorite robe, sat on the sofa and scribbled in a notebook. One of his antiquated towels was wrapped around her damp hair. He still couldn't get over the sight of her on his sofa, looking as comfortable as if she lived here-which, he was often amazed to realize, she did.

"Wasn't it wonderful?" she asked.

"Wasn't what wonderful?"

"Our wedding."

"It was!" She brought the subject up fairly often, and he realized he'd run out of anything new to say about it.

"I love thinking about it," she said, plumping up a needlepoint pillow and putting it behind her head. "A tuxedo and a tab collar are a terrific combination."

"No kidding?" He would remember that.

"I think you should dress that way again at the first possible opportunity."

He laughed. "It doesn't take much for you."

"That's true, dearest, except in the area of my new husband. There, it took quite a lot."

He felt that ridiculous, uncontrollable grin spreading across his face.

"It was a wonderful idea to ask Dooley to sing. He was absolutely masterful. And thank goodness for Ray Cunningham's video camera. I love the frames of you and Stuart in his bishop's regalia, standing in the churchyard . . . and the part where Miss Sadie and Preacher Greer are laughing together."

"Another case of two hearts beating as one."

"Would you like to see it again? I'll make popcorn."

"Maybe in a day or two." Hadn't they watched it only last week?

"It was very sweet and charming, the way you insisted on baking a ham for our reception."

"I always bake a ham for wedding receptions at Lord's Chapel," he said. "I'm stuck in that mode."

"Tell me something . . . ?"

"Anything!" Would he really tell her anything?

"How did you unstick your mode long enough to propose to me? What happened?"

"I realized . . . that is, I . . ." He paused thoughtfully and rubbed his chin. "To tell the truth, I couldn't help myself."

"Ummm," she said, smiling at him across the room. "You know I love that you knelt on one knee."

"Actually, I was prepared to go down on both knees. As soon as I dropped to one, however, you saw what was coming, and seemed so happy about it, I didn't bother to advance to the full kneel."

She laughed uproariously, and held her arms out to him. "Please come over here, dearest. You're so far away over there!"

The evening news was just coming on when the phone rang. It was his doctor and friend, Hoppy Harper, calling from the hospital.

“How fast can you get here?”

“Well . . .”

“I’ll explain later. Just get here.”

He was out the door in thirty seconds.