

Translation by Mark Kline

## Pheasants

The doorbell rings, and downstairs stands a man who introduces himself as Richard. His clothes are wet, it has been raining for several hours; a soggy newspaper lies on the doorstep.

He apologizes for intruding, but he used to rent part of this house, the second floor, do I live there? I say that I do. He apologizes again, he hasn't been in this part of town for several years, and it's just a coincidence that he is here now; he drove out to pick up some pheasants from a man who had put an ad in the paper. And so he stopped here on his way home, he says, because when he moved he forgot a few things in the basement. A picture, and possibly a small dresser.

I say that I'm expecting guests soon. He leans his head inside the hallway and says that he *thought* it smelled like gulasch. I say that it's an Italian stew with sundried tomatoes. He doesn't understand and asks me to repeat what I said. I say that it doesn't matter.

He asks if there's still a plumbing shop on the ground floor. There is. He laughs and asks about several things. If a battered-up shower stall still sits under the steps. If the door still bangs at night, if the basement is still flooded with paint cans, if there's an old jukebox down there. I say that the house has probably always been in need of upkeep. But that the rent is still cheap, and it's nice in the summer when the windows can be left open, when it's hot outside.

I let him in the hall, he insists on taking his boots off. Otherwise you'll have to wash the floor tomorrow, he says. So anyway he'll run on down to the basement and pick his things up so I can get back to my gulasch. He is almost sure that the small dresser is in the basement's back room. There's no need to help him look, he'll only be a minute.

He walks down in stocking feet, I walk up to my apartment and stir the stew. I take the cream out of the refrigerator, pour some in the pot, put the cream back. Then I hear how he wrestles the dresser up the basement steps and sets it down in the hall. He yells up to me, asking if he could bother me one more time, if I have a flashlight he could borrow? Because he can't find the picture but it's down there for sure on the floor somewhere and there is still no light down there, just like he thought. I yell down to him that yes, of course.

I don't own a flashlight. For whatever reason, though, I look for one, rattling drawers so he can hear me. I end up bringing him a candle and a box of matches.

This is way too dangerous, he says. Nobody should be walking around this basement carrying a candle, all these paint cans, it's an absolute fire trap. But maybe if I come down with him and just concentrate on holding the candle, he can look around. If I have time, that is.

Fortunately I remember my bike lights. I run up and find them in my coat pocket, hurry back down again. The one light he clips onto his shirt collar, the other he holds. He walks down into the basement again. I sit on his dresser.

I can hear him rummaging around, having no luck with finding his picture. He yells up, asking if that's my good-looking recliner in the middle of the floor. I yell back that it belongs to the plumbers. He can't understand why they would let such a fine recliner go to waste. Then he asks if he could use my bathroom, since he's already there in the basement. Of course, I yell, and I begin humming.

He comes back up and asks if he could possibly use my sink upstairs, he'd like to wash his hands after going to the bathroom, that's just the way he is. I let him lead the way up the stairs.

In the kitchen he washes his hands carefully and dries them on his pants, they're soaking wet anyway he says, and he lifts the lid off the stew. I ask if he would like a glass of water before my guests arrive. He would love that.

He walks into the living room. It's incredible, he says, the way furniture can change a room. His tv had stood over in the corner, but his dining table had been in the same spot as mine. He recognizes a knot in the exposed rafter above the sofa, asks if the room is still so drafty that if you held a candle by the window it would go out. I say that I really do not know. He asks if he can show me, then he asks for the candle and matches from before. He lights the candle, carries it to the window, the flame goes out, he nods.

He drinks his water in small gulps. It's too bad anyway about the picture, he says. His brother gave it to him. It was a sunflower with its roots down in the ocean, he got it when he was twenty-one. Now he's forty-one and how old am I? Thirty-two, I say. That is not entirely true.

As he sits there, recalling the view, I go into the bedroom. At once I lift the picture off the wall and shove it under the bed. Then he comes in. He says that his bed stood where mine does, but of course there aren't very many possibilities. He asks where I bought my wardrobe. I bought it in a department store. He asks if he can look inside, and I say that he may not. He excuses his curiosity by explaining that he's looking for a wardrobe himself, one that has at least two shelves for shoes. I say that you can decide for yourself whether to put shoes on a shelf or not. He says that actually you can't. Certain shelves are specially designed for shoes, it has to do with the lining and the spacing between shelves. You learn something new every day, I say.

Back in the living room, he asks if he can help set the table. No, I say, my guests always do it themselves, it's a tradition. He says that these guests I invite must be easy to entertain. Can't he fold napkins or put the knives and forks out? No, I say.

He sits in the window sill, annoyed at the loss of the picture. His brother bought it during a trip to Berlin and dropped it as he got off the train. Which is why his brother had to have it reframed before giving it to him for his twenty-first birthday. So in that way the picture had its own history, and like he said it's supposed to be a sunflower with its roots in the

ocean, a gigantic net of roots, with a whole lot of small fish all tangled up in them.

He asks if there still is an extra key to the plumbing shop under the flower pot down in the yard. Because it could be that someone working there had found the picture in the basement and hung it in the office, the secretary maybe, she's someone who would do something like that. He could grab the key and let himself in, just to look around.

I walk into the bedroom and pull the picture out from under the bed. I hand it to him and say that it was the description of the tangled-up fish that jogged my memory. That I had discovered the picture down there in the dark right after moving in, and I had brought it up because I needed something to hang on the wall. But that it has been under my bed ever since, that I had forgotten about it.

He brightens up, he holds the picture up in front of him. He asks if I don't think I'll miss it, because my walls are actually pretty bare. I say that I can hardly miss something that has just been lying under my bed.

Then there's really nothing more for him to do here, he says. He has his dresser now, too, it just needs washing off to be ready to use. He'll hang the picture over the dresser, which will stand beside the wardrobe he has to buy. His shoes are scattered all over the place, he really needs somewhere to put them.

He asks if he could give me a pheasant to show his appreciation for my help. He's just bought fifteen of them from a hunter, they were shot this past weekend, he'd like to give me one, just hang it by the head a few days and pluck it. And into the pot it goes.

I say no thank you, I couldn't accept it, and besides I have no idea what to do with it. He suggests that I hang it outside my kitchen window, that's what he would do. I say no thanks, I don't know how to pluck it, either. Would I like for him to explain how? I say no, and walk toward the door. Too bad, he says, and follows me downstairs.

He puts on his boots and shakes my hand before lifting the dresser and carrying it out into the rain, the picture in one of its drawers.

I stand in the kitchen and stir the pot. It takes a while before I hear him drive off in his car. I spoon some of the stew up, take it into the living room, turn on the tv. I sit on the sofa and eat. I grab the remote, turn the sound down. It's quiet except for the rain.

The light is still on in the hall. I walk downstairs and pull on the front door, make sure it's locked. Shortly after I look outside. Everything is dark; there isn't a single car on the road. A pheasant lies on the doorstep, sopping wet. As if it has drowned after its death. Its feathers are brown and green.