

HASAN MANZAR

The Cactus

AFTER RINGING THE DOORBELL, my wife and I stood quietly beside the door, each thinking the same thoughts: let's see how this home owner turns out, what his wife is like, and, above all, what this house looks like inside.

On the outside the house was very quiet—almost soothingly tranquil, something that we had been looking for. A cool morning breeze was blowing through the foliage. Beside the rustle of leaves, only one other sound could be heard—that of music coming from somewhere far off.

Near where I stood, there was a full grown cactus. Somehow, it hinted at the personality of the owner of the house. Some time ago, when this cactus had grown past the window and its top had begun to touch the eave, a hole had been cut into the overhanging eave to allow it to grow unimpeded. Now its top had gone through the hole and stood above it proudly, looking somewhat like an ostrich, holding his head high after he has beaten back his rivals.

Gesturing with my eyes, I pointed out the hole in the eave to my wife.

“I've noticed already. Looks like they're nice people.”

We heard the distant rattle of a door latch being opened somewhere inside the house. Then the voice of a middle-aged man inquired: “Who is it?”

After a short pause I said that we had come to have a look at the house. The voice asked, “Are you from some real estate agency?”

“No,” I answered.

“Okay. Just a minute.” These words were followed by a long silence. The tension that usually precedes such a visit had disappeared. In a sense

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we had been introduced to the owner of the house. So we felt free enough to walk about a bit and look around the house. The information we had been given about the house was right: it had been built on an area of about 600 square yards and had two stories. We could also see that it had been well-maintained. All the window panes were intact. There were no drips of paint on the glass from when the wood had been painted.

Our probing had gone only so far when the front door opened and the owner of the house came out and stood on the doorstep. He examined us cursorily and asked us to come in.

First my wife entered the vestibule. I followed her, with the owner behind me. Although it was 10 AM, the house still seemed asleep. In the drawing room, the owner asked us questions about where we lived, what we did for a living, and so on; then, telling us to wait for a few moments, he vanished into the corridor that separated the rows of rooms. The two of us tried, once again, through eye gestures to tell each other our impressions.

The room was remarkably tidy. The curtains were separated in the middle and neatly tied with ribbons. Pictures hung on the walls everywhere and, astonishingly, there were no cobwebs behind any frame, nor even any dust on the glass. The cream colored back-covers for the sofa looked fresh and clean, as if they had been placed there just that morning.

On the other side of this large room, behind the glass bead-curtain, was the dining table. Extra chairs had been lined up nicely along the wall.

“They don’t seem very anxious to sell,” my wife whispered.

“Why?” I inquired, startled.

“All the signs show that they’re well-nestled. Those who want to sell often just cosmetically dress things up. They don’t polish the leaves of the rubber plant in their drawing room, do they?”

I had missed that one.

That gentleman came into the dining room through some secret entrance and stood parting the glass bead-curtain. “Let me show you around the house,” he said.

“Wouldn’t it be better if we had some idea of the price first, to see if we can afford the house?” I said.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said. “Have a look at it first.”

“But we might just end up tiring you for nothing if we ...” said my wife.

“...If you can’t buy the house?” he completed her sentence. “Don’t let that bother you. This has been our routine for quite a few days now.

Interested parties come to look at the house; some object to this, some to that. But neither my wife nor I feel tired of that,” he added.

“No,” my wife said, “what we mean is that it wouldn’t be fair if we made you take the trouble of showing us the house but later couldn’t even come up with enough for the down payment.”

“There’s another possibility too. This house may not prove to be worth the money you want to spend on it,” he said with a laugh. “Come on, madam, let’s start with the ground level.”

“All right, as you wish,” my wife answered.

“As you can see, there are three bedrooms at this level—one master bedroom and two others which are almost as big as the master bedroom. Each has an attached bathroom.”

My wife whispered in my ear, “Perhaps the other buyers found the price too steep.”

“Yes, maybe. But there’s no harm in looking at the house,” I answered in a similar whisper.

From the construction and size of the house we had already gathered that it was going to be way beyond our means. The owner walked ahead of us, urging us to go inside every room and look at it. Every room was nicely decorated. Photographs of the members of the family, old and young, hung on the walls. The old members in black and white, the young almost all in color. There were also a few pictures of some foreigners. The kitchen as well as the gallery had pictures on the walls, and there were flower pots everywhere. My wife observed the American-style kitchen with great interest and attention. I could easily guess what was going through her mind: in our own house, whenever we build it—if we don’t buy this one—the layout of this kitchen will come in very handy.

Then we started going up the stairs. Like those downstairs, the bedrooms upstairs were also unoccupied. There was no one asleep in any of them. In one room there was a child’s bike and a rocking horse on the carpet.

“This is perhaps your children’s room?” my wife inquired.

“No, my children’s children,” the man answered good-humoredly.

“Are they at school?” I asked. But as soon as I had put the question, I realized that it was foolish because the day was a holiday.

“No, the two children whose room this is have gone to Kuwait.”

After admiring the neatness and order of the room for a short while, my wife said, “And it looks as if the things were put in order just today after the children left for school.”

“Or,” I said, “the children are so well-mannered that they themselves put everything in place before they left the room.”

“Oh, no,” the man answered, “I could tell you volumes about their good manners! Even when they know they are leaving for Kuwait, they leave a mess behind on the rug, as if they’re going to be back in a short while to resume their play. It’s we who have to arrange their things after coming back from the airport.”

It took us quite some time to go through that room. When we came out we ran into the owner’s wife. She was watering the plants in the flower pots hanging in the corridor. On seeing us, she said, “Forgive me. I was on the top floor when you people came in.”

My wife whispered, “Oh God. We’ve yet to see the top floor!”

The owner’s wife put the watering can down on the floor and wiped her wet hands on one end of her head-scarf. We stood there in awkward silence. Before long the gentleman spoke: “Let’s go up to the top floor.”

We both followed him up the stairs, me going willingly, but my wife quite against her wishes. Her knees bother her when she climbs stairs. It was, thus, no surprise to me that after climbing a couple of steps she said, “You go ahead. I’ll stay here and wait.”

She went towards the owner’s wife, took the watering can from her hand and said, “Allow me to do this. How many children do you have?”

The top floor—actually the roof—had a big open courtyard, on one end of which were two large rooms. In front of them was a large, L-shaped wooden patio with a banister. The flower pots on the patio had been watered recently. It seemed that the owner and his wife did not come to this level very often, perhaps only when the plants had to be watered. It took the owner quite some time to open the locks; they were somewhat rusted.

As I entered the first of these rooms, I asked the owner, “And whose room is this?”

“My older son’s,” he answered.

“Where is he?”

“In the States. In Houston.” Mattresses, without any coverings, lay on the box-springs. Various things had been piled up in one corner and covered with a tarp. One shelf was filled with books; the other with souvenirs from various countries.

Leaning against the railing on the patio, we talked for a long time about the world’s affairs. He asked me if I needed the house as my principle residence.

“Yes, at least that’s our wish. Only God knows when that wish will be

granted.”

“For how many people? I mean how big is your family?”

“There are three children and two adults.”

“Then this house is probably going to be a little big for you.”

“Yeah. I too think so. How many children do you have?”

“Three daughters, two sons, and seven grandchildren.”

“I don’t see any of them here,” I said, a little impudently.

“Oh, one daughter is in Kuwait, the other two in Canada. One son is in the States and the second one in England.”

Suddenly he seemed an old man to me. I noticed that near his earlobes some hair had escaped the blade. In some other spots on his cheeks he also hadn’t shaved carefully. There were white rings around his pupils in both eyes.

When we came downstairs, his wife and mine were sitting side by side in the drawing room. In front of them, there was coffee and some dry fruit on the trolley.

I asked for his permission to leave.

He said, “So, did you like the house?”

“Very much,” I answered.

“But ...” my wife intervened.

“I know. You cannot take it. It’s too big for your needs,” he said. “But that doesn’t make much difference, does it? We can still have a cup of coffee together.” He sat down on the sofa and started to break almonds with a nutcracker. Willy-nilly, I too sat down. His wife was serving coffee to my wife.

When, after coffee, my wife and I came out of the house, his wife accompanied us to the door. She said, “Come, let me show you my garden.”

“We’ve already met your cactus.”

“Oh, there are many more; meet them too.”

In a small garden she had accumulated a number of different shrubs and trees and creepers. There were a couple of palms as well. They all seemed to have been watered that morning.

Before leaving we stood in their car port, talking.

“Where would you live in Karachi after selling the house?” I asked him.

“Don’t know yet,” he said.

“With some relatives? Do you have any here?”

“Yes, there are some. Here and there. But it is useless to count on anyone’s being near you in order to live.”

Unexpectedly, his wife joined in the conversation. “We had chosen this city—that is, Hyderabad—and, more particularly, this house after a lot of consideration. Now we’re afraid of going to a new place. Who knows who might be where tomorrow?”

On the way back, my wife, as soon as she got in the car, said, “Do you know they have three daughters?”

“Yes, I know.”

“And two sons?”

“I know that, too.”

“They’re all married and gone, leaving the nest empty for the old folks. During the holidays, sometimes a daughter or the other visits them, but that’s all.”

“What about the sons?”

“One is married to an American. She works in the States. She sometimes comes to visit them. The other son’s wife is a Pakistani. She doesn’t get along with the old lady.”

I looked at my wife admiringly. I couldn’t have got that sort of information out of the old fellow.

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan*