

The Perfect Tenants
and The Mourners
V. S. Naipaul

Cambridge English Language Learning



The Perfect Tenants
and
The Mourners

V. S. Naipaul

The Perfect Tenants

We heard about the Dakins before they arrived. 'They're the perfect tenants*,' Mrs Cooksey, the landlady, said. 'Their landlady brought them to me personally. She says she's sorry to lose them, but she's leaving London and going to run a hotel in the country.'

The Dakins moved in so quietly it was some days before I knew they were in the house. On Saturday and Sunday I heard the sounds of washing and cleaning and of a carpet-sweeper from the flat above. On Monday there was silence again.

10

Once or twice that week I saw them on the steps. Mrs Dakin was about forty, tall and thin, with a sweet smile. 'She used to be a policewoman,' Mrs Cooksey said. 'Sergeant*, I think.' Mr Dakin was as old as his wife and looked as athletic*. But his rough, handsome face was humourless. His greetings were brief and firm and didn't encourage conversation.

Their behaviour was perfect. They never had visitors. They never had telephone calls. Their cooking never smelled. They never allowed their full milk bottles to remain on the doorstep and they never left an empty milk bottle on the doorstep in daylight. And they were silent. They had no radio. The only sounds were of brush, broom*, and carpet-sweeper. Sometimes at night, when the street fell silent, I heard them in their bedroom: a low murmur* occasionally interrupted by short, deep sounds.

20

'There are respectable people in every class,' Mrs Cooksey said. 'The trouble these days is that you never

know where you are. Look at the Seymours, creeping up late at night to the bathroom and splashing about together. You can't even trust the BBC* people.'

The Dakins quickly became the favourite tenants. Mr Cooksey invited Mr Dakin down to 'drinks'. Mrs Dakin invited Mrs Cooksey up to tea and Mrs Cooksey told us that she was satisfied with the appearance of the flat. 'They pay attention to every little thing,' Mrs Cooksey said. She knew no higher praise, and we all felt that she was critical of us.

10

It was from Mrs Cooksey that I learned, with disappointment, that the Dakins had their troubles. 'He fell off a ladder and broke his arm, but they won't pay any compensation.* His arm is bent and he can't even go for a holiday by the sea. What is more, he can't even do his job properly. He's an electrician, and you know how they're always climbing. But, there you are: *they* don't care. What are three hundred pounds to *them*? But will they give it? Do you know that the foreman* actually burned the ladder?'

20

I hadn't noticed any disfigurement* about Mr Dakin. I thought he was a man of considerable energy, but now I looked on him with greater interest and respect for his silence under such misfortune. We often passed on the stairs but only exchanged greetings. Things might have continued like this but for the New Year's Eve* party given by Mr and Mrs Cooksey.

At that time I was out of favour with the Cookseys. I had left about fifteen milk bottles on the doorstep and the milkman had refused to take them all at the same time. For a whole day six partly washed milk bottles remained on the doorstep, lowering the reputation of Mrs Cooksey's house. Some unpleasantness between Mrs Cooksey and the milkman followed and was quickly passed on to me.

30

When I came in that evening the door of the Cooksey's

sitting-room was open and through it came laughter, stamping of feet, and television music. Mr Cooksey, coming from the kitchen with a tray, gave me an odd look. He brought his lips rapidly over his false teeth and made a popping* sound.

'Pop-pop. Come in,' he said. *'Drink?'*

I went in. Although Mrs Cooksey was not drunk, she was gay. The laughter and the stamping came from the Dakins alone. They were dancing. Mrs Dakin shouted with pleasure whenever Mr Dakin spun her around. He was doing this quite well for a man with a permanently damaged left arm. When she saw me Mrs Dakin shouted again, and Mrs Cooksey giggled*, as though it was her duty to cheer the Dakins up. The couple from the flat below mine were there too. The lady sat on the seat of the armchair and the man on the arm. They were dressed in their usual way, and looked awkward and unhappy. I thought of this couple as the Knitmaster* and Knitmistress. They had many minor possessions: contemporary coffee tables, a coffee machine, a record-player, a television-set you could carry around, a 1946 Anglia car in which they sometimes offered free lifts to music festivals*, and a Knitmaster machine which was never idle for long.

The music stopped. Mrs Dakin pretended to faint into her husband's arms, and Mrs Cooksey clapped.

'Help yourself, help yourself,' Mr Cooksey shouted.

'Another drink, my dear?' the Knitmaster whispered to his wife.

'Yes, yes,' Mrs Dakin cried.

The Knitmistress gave Mrs Dakin an evil smile.

'What kind of drink would you like?' said Mr Cooksey. *'Beer, or something different?'*

'Give her the cocktail,'* Mrs Cooksey said.

Mr Cooksey's cocktails were well known to his older tenants. He had a responsible position in an important public company — he said he had thirty-four cleaners

under him — and the origin and exact mixture of his cocktails were suspect.

The Knitmistress took the cocktail and tasted it without showing much interest.

‘And you?’ Mr Cooksey asked.

‘Guinness*’, I said.

‘Guinness!’ Mr Dakin said, looking at me for the first time with interest. ‘Where did you learn to drink Guinness?’

We moved closer and talked about Guinness.

10

‘Of course it’s best in Ireland’, he said. ‘Thick and creamy. What’s it like where you come from?’

‘I can’t drink it there. It’s too warm’.

Mr Dakin shook his head. ‘It isn’t the climate. It’s the Guinness. It can’t travel. It gets sick.’

Soon it was time to sing a song and go to bed.

The next day the Dakins returned to their normal perfect behaviour, but now when we met, we stopped to say something to each other about the weather.

20

One evening, about four weeks later, I heard a lot of commotion* in the flat above. Footsteps crashed down the stairs, someone knocked heavily on my door, and then Mrs Dakin rushed in and cried ‘It’s my husband! He’s rolling on the floor in pain!’

Before I could say anything, she ran out and raced down to the Knitmasters.

‘My husband’s rolling on the floor in pain!’

The whirring sound* of the machine stopped and I heard the Knitmasters making sympathetic sounds.

30

The Knitmaster said, ‘Telephone for the doctor.’

I went and stood on the stairs, trying to look helpful. Mrs Dakin went to waken the Cookseys, there was more excited talking, then I heard the telephone. I went back to my room. After some thought I left my door wide open: I was trying to look helpful again.

Mrs Dakin, Mrs Cooksey and Mr Cooksey hurried up the stairs.

The Knitmaster machine was whirring again.

Soon there was a knock on my door and Mr Cooksey came in.

'Pop-pop. It's as hot as an oven up there. No wonder he's ill.'

I asked about Mr Dakin.

'A touch of indigestion*', if you ask me.' Then, like a man who was familiar with more important events, he added, 'One of my cleaners fell ill last week. Brain disease.' 10

The doctor came and the Dakins' flat was full of footsteps and conversation. Mr Cooksey ran up and down the steps, breathing heavily and pop-popping. Mrs Dakin was crying and Mrs Cooksey was comforting her. An ambulance bell rang in the street and soon Mr Dakin, Mrs Dakin and the doctor left.

'Appendix*', Mr Cooksey told me.

The Knitmaster opened his door.

'Appendix', Mr Cooksey shouted down. 'It was like an oven up there.' 20

'He was cold', Mrs Cooksey said.

'Pah!'

Mrs Cooksey looked anxious.

'Nothing to it*', Mr Cooksey said.

The Knitmaster said, 'I had mine taken out two years ago. It left only a small scar on the skin.' He measured the length with his finger. 'About that long. It's a nervous thing really. You get it when you are very worried. My wife had to have her appendix out before we went to France.' 30

The Knitmistress came out and smiled her terrible smile, showing her short square teeth, and narrowing her small eyes. She said 'Hello', and pulled on some woollen gloves, which perhaps she had just knitted on her machine. She wore a woollen skirt, a red sweater*, a brown jacket and a soft red-and-white hat.

'Appendix' Mr Cooksey said.

The Knitmistress only smiled again, and followed her husband downstairs to the 1946 Anglia.

'A terrible thing,' I said to Mrs Cooksey tentatively*.

'Pop-pop'. Mr Cooksey looked at his wife.

'Terrible thing,' Mrs Cooksey said.

Our quarrel over the milk bottles was over.

Mr Cooksey became animated*. 'Nothing to it. A lot of commotion for nothing at all – they kept that room like an oven.'

10

Mrs Dakin came back at about eleven. Her eyes were red but she was quite calm. She spoke about the kindness of the nurses. And then, to complete an unusual evening, I heard (at midnight on a weekday) the sound of the carpet-sweeper upstairs. The Knitmistress complained in her usual way. She opened her door and talked loudly to her husband about the nuisance.

Next morning Mrs Dakin went to the hospital again. She returned just before midday and as soon as she got into the hall she began to cry so loudly that I heard her on the second floor. I found her in Mrs Cooksey's arms when I went down. Mrs Cooksey was pale and her eyes were moist.

20

'What has happened?' I whispered.

Mrs Cooksey shook her head.

Mrs Dakin leaned against Mrs Cooksey, who was much smaller.

'And my brother is getting married tomorrow!' Mrs Dakin burst out.

30

'Come, now, Eva,' Mrs Cooksey said firmly. 'Tell me what happened at the hospital.'

'They're feeding him through a glass tube. They've put him on the danger list. And -- his bed is near the door!'

'That doesn't mean anything, Eva.'

'It does! It does!'

'Nonsense, Eva.'

'They've got him screened round*.'

'You must be brave, Eva.'

We led Mrs Dakin to Mrs Cooksey's sitting-room, and made her sit down and watched her cry.

'It burst inside him.' Mrs Dakin made a wild movement with her arm across her body. 'They had to cut him clean open, and — *scrape** it out.' After she had said this terrible word, she allowed her despair to overcome her.

10

'Come now, Eva,' Mrs Cooksey said. 'He wouldn't like you to behave like this.'

We all looked after Mrs Dakin between her visits to the hospital. The news didn't get better. Mrs Dakin had tea with the Cookseys. She had tea with the Knit-mistress. She had tea with me. We talked gaily about everything except the sick man, and Mrs Dakin was very brave. She even told us about some of her adventures in the police force. She also complained:

20

'The first thing that Mr Cooksey said when he came up that evening was "This room is like an oven!" I couldn't do anything about that. My husband was cold. What a thing to say!'

I gave Mrs Dakin many of the magazines which were on the enormous dresser* in my kitchen. I noticed that the Knitmistress was doing the same.

Mr Cooksey allowed himself to grow a little grave. He discussed the operation like a doctor: 'When it bursts inside them, you see, it poisons the whole system. That's the reason why they had to cut him open and clean him out. Usually, you die after that.'

30

Mrs Cooksey said, 'He was such a nice man. I am so glad now that we enjoyed ourselves on New Year's Eve. I'm really sorry for her. He was her second, you know.'

'Aah,' Mr Cooksey said. 'There are women like that.'

I said to the Knitmistress, 'He was such a nice man.'

‘Yes, he was, wasn’t he?’

I heard Mrs Dakin crying all over the house. I heard her crying on the staircase.

Mrs Cooksey said, ‘It’s all so terrible. Her brother was married yesterday, but she couldn’t go to the wedding. She had to send a telegram. They are coming to see Mr Dakin. What a thing to happen on a honeymoon!’*

Mrs Dakin’s brother and his bride arrived on a motor-cycle. Mrs Dakin was at the hospital when they came and Mrs Cooksey gave them tea.

10

I didn’t see Mrs Dakin that evening, but late that night I saw the honeymoon couple: they were running upstairs with bottles wrapped in paper. He was a huge man — a footballer, Mrs Cooksey said — and when he ran up the stairs you heard it all over the house. His bride was small, countrified*, and gay. They stayed awake a long time.

Next morning, when I went down to get the paper, I saw the footballer’s motorcycle on the doorstep. It had leaked a lot of oil.

20

Again that day Mrs Dakin didn’t come to our rooms. And that evening there was another party in the flat above. We heard the footballer’s heavy footsteps, his shouts, his wife’s giggles, Mrs Dakin’s murmur.

Mrs Dakin didn’t need our company now. We had to ask how Mr Dakin was ourselves, whether he liked the magazines we sent, whether he wanted any more. Then Mrs Dakin said that Mr Dakin was grateful to us.

Mrs Cooksey didn’t like the new reticence*. We didn’t either. For some time, however, the Knitmaster tried to find something out. Two days later Mrs Dakin said: ‘I told him what you said about nerves and he wondered how you knew.’ Then she repeated the story about the fall from the defective* ladder, the bent arm, the foreman burning the ladder.

30

We were astonished. It was our first sign that the

Dakins were taking an interest in the world outside the hospital.

‘Well, really!’ Mrs Cooksey said.

The Knitmistress began to complain about the noise in the evenings.

‘Pah!’ Mr Cooksey said. ‘It didn’t burst inside him. Feeding through a glass tube, indeed!’

We heard the honeymoon couple jumping down the stairs. The front door crashed shut, then we heard the thunderous noise of the motor-cycle. ‘The police could catch him,’ Mr Cooksey said. ‘No silencer*.’

10

‘Well!’ Mrs Cooksey said, ‘I am glad *somebody* is having a good time. So cheap, too. Where do you think they’re going?’

‘Not the hospital’ Mr Cooksey said. ‘Football, more likely.’ This reminded him. He drew the curtains and turned on the tiny television set. We watched the horse-racing, then part of the football-match. Mrs Cooksey gave me tea. Mr Cooksey offered me a cigarette. I was back in favour.

20

The next day, eight days after Mr Dakin had gone to the hospital, I met Mrs Dakin outside the tobacconist’s shop. She was shopping, and her shopping-bag, which was full, showed how happy she was.

‘He’s coming back tomorrow,’ she said.

I replied that I had not expected such a rapid recovery*.

‘Everybody at the hospital was surprised,’ Mrs Dakin said. ‘But it’s because he’s so strong, you see.’ She opened her shopping-bag. ‘I’ve got some drinks and’ — she laughed — ‘some Guinness of course. And I’m buying a duck, to have with apple sauce. He loves apple sauce. He says the apple sauce helps the duck to go down.’ I smiled at the little family joke. Then Mrs Dakin asked me,

30

‘Guess who went to the hospital yesterday.’

'Your brother and his wife.'

She shook her head and said, 'The foreman!'

'The one who burned the ladder?'

'Oh, and he was ever so nice. He brought grapes and magazines and told my husband not to worry about anything. They're frightened now all right. As soon as my husband went to hospital my solicitor* wrote them a letter. And my solicitor says we have a good chance of getting more than three hundred pounds now.'

I saw the Knitmaster on the stairs that evening and told him about Mr Dakin's recovery. 10

'That means the complications* were not serious,' he said. 'But it's a nervous thing. A nervous thing.'

The Knitmistress opened the kitchen door.

'He's coming back tomorrow,' the Knitmaster said.

The Knitmistress gave me one of her terrible smiles.

'Five hundred pounds for falling off a ladder,' Mrs Cooksey said, 'Ha! It's as easy as falling off a log, isn't it, Bess?'

Mrs Cooksey sighed. 'That's what Labour* has done to this country. They didn't do a thing for the middle class.' 20

'Bent arm! Can't go for a holiday by the sea! Pampering*, that's what it is.'

The noise of the motorcycle broke the silence.

'Our happy honeymooners' Mr Cooksey said.

'They'll soon be leaving,' Mrs Cooksey said, and went out to meet them in the hall.

'Whose key are you using?'

'Eva's,' the footballer said, running up the stairs. 30

'We'll see about that,' Mrs Cooksey called.

Mrs Dakin said:

'I went down to Mrs Cooksey and I said "Mrs Cooksey, what do you mean by insulting my guests? It's bad enough for them having their honeymoon spoilt, without being insulted." And Mrs Cooksey said that she had

let* the flat to me and my husband and not to my brother and his wife, and they would have to go. And I told her that they were leaving tomorrow anyway because my husband is coming back tomorrow. And I told her I hoped she was satisfied that she had spoiled their honeymoon, which comes only once in a lifetime. And she said that some people managed to have two, which I took as a reference to myself because, as you know, my first husband died during the war. And then I told her that if that was the way she was going to behave then I could have nothing more to say to her. And she said she hoped I would have the oil from my brother's bike cleaned up. And I said that if my husband hadn't been ill, I would have given notice* there and then. And she said it was *because* my husband was ill that she didn't give me notice, which any other landlady would have done.'

10

Three things happened the next day. The footballer and his wife left. Mrs Dakin told me that the firm* had given her husband four hundred pounds. And Mr Dakin returned from hospital, no more noticed by the rest of the household than if he had returned from a day's work. No sounds came from the Dakins' flat that evening except for the murmur and sound of conversation.

20

Two days later I heard Mrs Dakin come racing down to my flat. She knocked and entered at the same time. 'The television's coming today,' she said.

Mr Dakin was going to put up the aerial* himself. I wondered whether he was, as yet, strong enough to go climbing about the roof.

30

'They wanted ten pounds to do it. But my husband's an electrician and he can do it himself. You must come up tonight. We're going to celebrate.'

I went up. There was a model aeroplane on the top of the television set. The set looked very new.

Mrs Dakin emptied a bottle of Tio Pepe* into three small glasses.

'Good health,' she said, and we drank to that.

Mr Dakin looked thin and fatigued*. Despite the fatigue, he seemed contented. We watched a play about a 400-year-old man who drank something which made him look no more than twenty. From time to time Mrs Dakin gave little cries of pleasure, at the play, the television set, and the quality of the sherry.

Mr Dakin lazily picked up the empty bottle and studied it. '*Spanish* sherry,' he said.

10

Mr Cooksey was waiting for me the following day, and he said, 'Big television they've got.'

I replied, 'Eighteen inch.'

'Those big ones hurt the eyes, don't you find?'

'They do.'

'Come in and have a drink. BBC and Commercial*?'

I nodded.

'I never did agree with those commercials. Ruining the country. We're not going to have ours changed¹.'

20

'We're waiting for the colour,' Mrs Cooksey said.

Mrs Cooksey loved a battle. She lived for her house alone. She had no relations or friends, and little happened to her or her husband. Once, during the war, Mr Cooksey was mistaken for an enemy leader at Victoria station, but for the most part Mrs Cooksey's conversation was about her victories over tenants. In her battles with them she stuck to the rules. *The Law of Landlord and Tenant* was one of the few books among the many china* animals in the large bookcase in her sitting-room. And Mrs Cooksey had her own idea of victory. She never gave anyone notice. That was almost an admission of defeat. Mrs Cooksey asked me, 'You didn't throw a

30

1 changed: changed in order to receive Commercial television programmes; when the story was written, not all television sets could receive both BBC and Commercial television programmes.

loaf of stale bread into the garden, did you?' I said I hadn't.

'I didn't think so. That's what the other people in this street do, you know. It's a fight to keep this house the way it is, I can tell you. There are the mice, you see. You haven't any mice up here, have you?'

'As a matter of fact, I had one yesterday.'

'I knew it. The moment you let up*, these things start happening. All the other houses in this street have mice. That's what the sanitary inspector* told me. He said this was the cleanest house in the whole street. But the moment you start throwing food about you're certain to get mice.'

10

That evening I heard Mrs Dakin complaining loudly. She was doing it the way the Knitmistress did: talking loudly to her husband through an open door.

'Coming up here and asking if I had thrown a loaf of bread into her nasty little garden. And talking about people having too much to eat these days. Well, if it's one thing I like, it's a warm room. I don't wrap myself up in a blanket and huddle* in front of the fire and then come and say somebody else's room is like an oven.'

20

Mrs Dakin left her kitchen door open and did the washing-up with a lot of bangs and noises. The television sound was turned up louder and in my room I could hear every commercial, every song, every word. The carpet-sweeper was brought into action; I heard it banging against the walls and furniture.

The next day Mrs Cooksey continued her mice hunt. She went into all the flats and took up the floor-covering and put newspapers in the gaps between the floorboards. She also emptied Mrs Dakin's dustbin*. 'To keep away the mice,' she told us.

30

I heard the Dakins' television again that night. The next morning there was a large notice in the hall. I recognized Mr Cooksey's handwriting and style: WILL THE PERSON OR PERSONS RESPONSIBLE SEE

ABOUT THE IMMEDIATE REMOVAL OF THE OIL STAINS ON THE FRONT STEPS. In the bathroom there was a notice tied to the pipe on the geyser*: WILL THE PERSON OR PERSONS WHO HAVE BEEN INTERFERING WITH THIS TAP PLEASE STOP IT. And in the lavatory: WE NEVER THOUGHT WE WOULD HAVE TO MAKE THIS REQUEST BUT WILL THE PERSON OR PERSONS RESPONSIBLE PLEASE LEAVE THINGS AS THEY WOULD LIKE TO FIND THEM.

10

The Dakins attacked back at once. Four unwashed milk bottles were placed on the stains on the steps. An empty whisky bottle was placed next to the dustbin.

I felt the Dakins won that one.

'Drink and football,' Mr Cooksey said. 'That's all that class of people spends its money on. Pampering! You mustn't upset yourself, Bess. They'll make a mistake sooner or later.'

The television boomed* through the house that evening. The washing-up was done noisily, the carpet-sweeper banged against walls and furniture, and Mrs Dakin sang loudly. Then I heard other sounds and a few loud cries. The Dakins were dancing. This went on for a short time. Then I heard a bath being run.

20

There was a soft knock on my door and Mrs Cooksey came in.

'I just wanted to find out who was having the bath,' she said.

For a few moments after she left the bath continued to run. Then there was a hissing sound* of running water. And soon the bath was silent.

30

There was no independent water supply to the geyser ('Unhealthy' Mr Cooksey said) and the flow of water to the geyser depended on the taps in the house. By turning on a tap in your kitchen you could lessen the flow and heat of the water from the geyser. The hissing

sound showed that someone had turned a tap full on downstairs, making the geyser useless.

From the silent bathroom I heard occasional splashes. The hissing sound continued. Then Mr Dakin sneezed.

The bathroom door opened and was closed with a bang. Mr Dakin sneezed again and Mrs Dakin said, 'If you catch pneumonia*, I know who your solicitor will write to next.'

And all they could do was to smash part of the geyser.

It seemed that they had accepted defeat, because they did nothing further the next day. I was with the Cookseys when the Dakins came in from work that afternoon. In a few minutes they had left the house again. Nobody had turned on the light in the Cookseys' sitting-room and we stared at the Dakins through the curtains. They walked arm in arm.

10

'Going to look for a new place, I suppose,' Mr Cooksey said. There was a knock and the Knitmistress came in, her smile was still terrible and brilliant*, even in the darkness. She said 'Hallo'. Then she addressed Mrs Cooksey: 'Our lights have gone.' 'Power failure,' Mr Cooksey said. But the street lights were on. The light in the Cookseys' room was turned on but nothing happened.

20

Mrs Cooksey's face fell.

'Fuse,*' Mr Cooksey said, decisively. He regarded himself as an electrical expert. With the help of a candle he selected a piece of fuse wire*, went down to the fuse box, urged us to turn off all the lights and fires and stoves, and set to work. The wire fused* again. And again.

30

'He's played some trick,' Mr Cooksey said.

But we couldn't find out what it was. The Dakins had changed the locks on their doors.

The Knitmistress complained.

'It's no use, Bess' Mr Cooksey said. 'You'll just have