

QUICK READS

The Gardener

A short story by Cooper Baltis



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Part One

'Thanks for your help,' Zach said to his friend, Aiden, as they carried a couch up the stairs to Zach's new apartment.

'No problem. I owed you one, remember?'

Aiden was a chunky man with a thick beard. He was the opposite of Zach, who was skinny and clean-shaven. They met in high school, and had been friends ever since.

'What do you owe me for?' Zach asked. They dropped the couch onto the living room floor. Aiden wiped sweat from his forehead.

'I owe you for the time you let me sleep in your new apartment.'

'That hasn't happened yet,' Zach laughed.

'Well it will. I'm sure of it.'

Both men had recently graduated from college. Zach had already got a job in a law firm in Boston. Aiden still lived with his parents. Aiden hated living with his parents, but he loved his mom's cooking.

'I can't believe you're sweating. It's minus five outside!'

'Moving furniture is hard work,' Aiden said, smiling at his friend.

'So, do you want to go out for dinner?' Zach asked. 'Or I could order a pizza? I really appreciate your help.'

'Nope, I can't tonight. I need to get home,' Aiden said, 'my mom is cooking a casserole.'

'Well, you can spend the night here anytime you want.'

'Thanks.'

'But the couch is small, so it might be a little cramped,' said Zach, pointing at the two-seater couch.

Aiden looked at the couch, it was indeed small. 'I'll give you a call tomorrow. You really need to do some decorating,' he joked. 'This place is so ugly and old!'

Zach spent the whole night sorting out his new apartment. Aiden was right; the apartment was really old and ugly. The ceiling was yellow and the walls were cracked. The walls in the bathroom were damp and covered in mold. Zach didn't care though, it was his first apartment, his first chance to live alone.

The next morning, Zach went to a small second-hand store near his apartment. He bought some knives and forks and some dishes. He was on his way out of the store when he noticed a picture covered with an old cloth leaning against the wall.

'Can I see that picture?' he asked the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper slowly looked down at the picture. The lights in the small second-hand store flickered. The shopkeeper looked up at the lights. He stared at them until they stopped flickering.

'This one here?' the shopkeeper whispered.

'Yes, that one,' Zach said. He wondered why the man was acting so strangely.

The shopkeeper bent over and picked up the picture. He slowly removed the cloth that was covering the front of the picture.

'Nice.' Zach said.

It was a painting of an old house with a garden. The grass in the garden was long and untidy. At the back of the garden, near the house, there was a man. The man was looking out, but Zach could barely see the man's face because he was in the shadows.

The shopkeeper handed him the picture. It felt heavy in his hands. 'How much?' Zach asked.

The shopkeeper thought for a second. 'It's OK, take it,' he said.

'For free?'

‘Yes, it’s fine.’ The shopkeeper seemed nervous. ‘It’s been sitting there for months. I’m just happy to get rid of it.’

‘OK, great!’ said Zach. ‘This will look really cool in my living room.’

Part Two

Aiden came over that night at around seven o’clock.

‘The place looks nice,’ he said, shaking Zach’s hand. ‘It still looks old though.’

‘Thanks, man!’ Zach laughed. ‘I was up all night working on it.’

Aiden handed Zach a plastic bag with a container in it. ‘I’ve brought you some of my mom’s casserole.’

‘Thanks, but I was planning to order a pizza.’

‘Let’s do that instead. You can eat the casserole tomorrow.’

Zach ordered the pizza and Aiden sat down on the couch. He stretched his hands over his head and yawned, then he saw something move out of the corner of his eye. He looked up and noticed the new picture on Zach’s wall. Zach had hung the picture next to the front door. Aiden walked over to the picture. He suddenly felt cold, like someone had opened a window.

‘OK, the pizza will be here in thirty minutes,’ Zach said. ‘Let’s hope it doesn’t take an hour. I’m starving.’

‘Where did you get this picture?’ Aiden asked.

‘The garden picture?’ Zach came around from the kitchen. ‘I got it at the second-hand store down the street. Do you like it?’

‘It’s...’ Aiden didn’t know the right word to describe the picture. ‘It’s a little creepy.’

‘Creepy?’ Zach laughed. ‘What’s so creepy about it?’

‘Who’s the guy?’ Aiden pointed at the man in the picture.

‘I don’t know. Maybe he’s the gardener.’

‘Why is he holding a knife?’

‘He’s holding a knife?’ Zach came closer to examine the picture. ‘I guess I never noticed that before.’ He now saw the knife in the gardener’s hand. He also noticed that the man seemed to be a little closer to the front of the garden.

‘That’s strange,’ he said.

‘What’s strange?’ Aiden asked.

‘I’m sure the gardener was here last time I looked at the picture.’ Zach pressed his finger against the glass of the picture frame. The glass was slightly warm. He quickly took his hand away.

‘It’s a really creepy picture. You should put it somewhere else.’

‘It’s not creepy, it’s just old. I like it here. It gives me something to look at when I leave the apartment.’

‘You’ve always had strange taste,’ Aiden said.

‘Anyway... video games.’

The two men sat on the couch in front of the TV. For the next forty-five minutes, they played a fighting game called Street Killer 9 and ate pizza. But Aiden was still

hungry, so Zach warmed up the casserole in the microwave.

After the casserole, Zach yawned. 'I'm getting tired,' he said. Then he suddenly jumped off the couch.

'What's wrong?' said Aiden.

'I...' Zach looked over at the gardener's picture on the wall. 'Impossible.'

'What's impossible?'

Zach took two steps closer to the picture. 'Aiden, come and look at this.'

'What?' Aiden said.

'Is the gardener closer to the front of the garden? I swear he was here earlier.' Zach pointed at the far corner of the picture.

Aiden didn't say anything for a moment. Finally, he looked over at Zach. 'This is going to sound stupid, but do you have a marker?'

Part Three

Aiden pressed the black marker on the body of the man. He made a black smudge on the glass covering the picture. 'There,' he said, 'we know where he is now. We will see if he moves again.'

Zach took a step closer to the picture. 'Can you see his face? I swear I couldn't see his face just a few minutes ago.'

Aiden looked away. All the nerves in his body were tingling and his mouth suddenly went dry. 'You should take this picture down. There's something wrong with it.'

'No, it's fine. I think we've been playing too many video games, we're imagining things. We need to sleep,' Zach said. 'Let's just see what the picture looks like in the morning.'

Zach turned towards his bedroom. 'I'll get you some pillows and a blanket.'

'I'm not sleeping in here,' Aiden said. His face suddenly looked pale.

'What do you mean?'

'I'm definitely not sleeping in the same room as that picture.'

Zach laughed. 'Don't be a big baby. Do you really want me to take the picture down?'

Aiden nodded. The look on his face was dead serious. The lights flickered and the apartment suddenly felt colder.

'Really?' Zach asked, walking over to the picture. 'Fine, I'll take it down.'

Zach reached forward and touched the gardener's picture. The picture was hot, like a frying pan on a stove. He jumped back and looked down at his hand... it was burnt.

'Ouch!'

'What's wrong?' Aiden asked.

Zach blew on his hand. 'It's hot! The picture burnt me.'

'I told you there was something wrong with that picture!' Aiden appeared next to his friend. 'Are you OK?'

'I'm fine. Maybe the picture is too close to the radiator or something,' Zach said. He looked down at the radiator and back up at the picture. His mouth dropped open. The man in the picture had moved past the mark Aiden had made with the black marker.

'He's moved!' Zach said, pointing at the picture. 'The gardener has moved!'

The gardener had moved to the center of the picture. He had a nasty look on his face. His nose was long and hooked, his ears were pointed, and his shoulders were broad. His body was covered in black mud. The knife in his hand also looked longer and sharper than before.

'We need to get out of here!' Aiden jumped away from the picture and tripped over the coffee table in front of Zach's couch. He fell backwards and hit the back of his head on the floor.

'Aiden!'

Zach knelt down next to his friend. 'Are you OK?'

Aiden didn't say anything. Zach noticed some blood on the floor. He looked from Aiden back to the gardener's picture. The man was even closer to the front of the picture now. His face was close enough to see a few hairs sticking out of his long nose.

Suddenly the picture started shaking. It beat against the wall. The glass shattered and fell to the floor, smashing into small pieces. Zach looked away to stop glass from going in his eyes, but when he looked back, a hand was coming out of the painting... one filthy finger at a time.

Part Four

‘Aiden! Wake up!’ Zach screamed. He slapped his friend’s face. ‘Come on! Come on!’ He was so afraid that he was almost crying.

He looked up at the gardener’s picture. An arm covered in black hairs and mud started reaching out of the picture frame.

‘Come on!’ Zach tried to pick his friend up, but Aiden was much larger and heavier than he was. ‘We’ve got to get out of here!’

Black mud dripped from the arm that was now hanging out of the picture. Zach heard a terrible scream. The scream came from the picture. The scream came from the gardener.

Zach grabbed Aiden’s legs and dragged him across the floor of the living room.

The arm that was reaching out of the picture became a shoulder. The shoulder was connected to a body; a naked body covered in dirt and black hair. The body was thin but muscular. Another hand came out of the picture, the knife flashed in the light.

Zach looked from the front door to the bedroom door. If he went to the front door, the arm reaching out of the picture would surely catch him. If he locked himself in his bedroom, he could call the police and try and wake Aiden up.

Zach pulled Aiden's legs with all his strength. The lights in his apartment flickered on and off. The floor creaked with every step he took. Zach stopped just in front of his bedroom door. He looked up at the picture one last time.

A man covered in mud had fallen out of the picture. He was lying on the floor with his knees to his chest. Suddenly, he turned to face Zach. His eyes were red; his face was covered in blood and dirt.

Zach reached the bedroom door. His heart was beating against his chest. He pulled Aiden inside the bedroom, slammed the door shut and took out his cell phone.

Part Five

'So what do we have here?' Detective Adams said to his partner, Sergeant Finn.

Finn opened a small black notebook. 'Looks like two guys have disappeared.'

'Names?'

'Zach Kemper and Aiden Cole.'

'Who reported it?' asked Adams.

‘The neighbor,’ said Finn, looking in his notebook. ‘She said she heard ‘horrible screams’ at about nine o’clock.’

‘And where did all this mud come from?’ Adams asked, looking down at the floor.

‘I don’t know...’ Finn shook his head. ‘And look over here... we didn’t notice this at first, but there’s a footprint here.’

‘A footprint?’

‘Yes, and the person was barefoot. You can see toes here.’ The two policemen bent down to look at the muddy footprint. ‘It’s like someone came out of the wall or something.’

‘That’s weird,’ said Adams, frowning. ‘It’s like those boys just disappeared.’

‘Anyway, I’ll go and talk to the neighbor again,’ said Finn, leaving the detective looking at a picture on the wall.

It was a painting of an old house with a garden. The grass in the garden was long and untidy. At the back of the garden, near the house, there were three men. The men were looking out, but the detective could barely see their faces because they were in the shadows.

