Your Presence in an Empty House

She isn't looking for someone to help. She's looking for room to belong



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INTRO

On the first day I was truly alone in the house, I broke the lock on the door to the room that was supposed to belong entirely to me.

I didn't do it out of anger. At least, not consciously. I simply turned the key too hard, heard an unpleasant snap, and found myself holding its brass head in my hand. The rest remained lodged in the lock, as though the house had decided to express an opinion about my plans.

"Wonderful," I said to the empty hallway. "We're starting with honesty."

I was fifty years old, with two grown children who had moved out and were supporting themselves, and a job I loved too much to call an escape. For twenty-three years, I'd worked in furniture restoration. I could distinguish traces of an old repair from an original wooden joint, bring a damaged French polish back to life, and patiently work on a single piece of marquetry for days. What I couldn't do was answer my friends when they asked what I intended to do with an entire house now that the children had left.

The answer was simple enough.

I intended to finally live in it.

Not merely sleep, cook, do laundry, and remember everyone's appointments. I wanted to occupy space without having to justify my presence through other people's needs. I planned to turn my daughter's old room into a small workshop for delicate repairs. My son's room would become a library where nobody would leave dumbbells on top of books. And the former dining room, which until now had

been used mainly for family celebrations, would open its doors to neighborhood book gatherings.

That last idea didn't mean I wanted to start organizing everybody's lives again. As I imagined it, people would bring their own books, their own tea, and even their own chairs if we ran out of seats. I was offering the space, not making myself available whenever anyone called.

At least, that was the plan I'd written in my new notebook.

My phone vibrated on the windowsill.

Regina, darling, could you make something sweet for our first gathering? Mrs. Halina from the next street had written. You have such talented hands!

I looked at the message, then at the broken key.

For years, all anyone had needed to do was call me capable, and I would immediately take on another responsibility. Talented hands meant fixing things, preparing things, cleaning up, making sure everything was taken care of. But today, my hands wanted to hold sandpaper, not a baking tray.

I replied that everyone was welcome to bring something of their own.

I read the message three times before sending it.

Outside, an October afternoon was beginning. Our street on the outskirts of Poznań looked peaceful, almost sleepy. Wet leaves clung to the pavement, and the smell of smoke from fireplaces drifted over the fences. The house stood at the end of a short row of similar buildings, but for twenty years it had been so full of voices that I'd never given a thought to its acoustics. Now I could hear every creak of the stairs.

I went downstairs to the dining room, taking my notebook and tape measure with me. In the middle of the room stood an oak table that had belonged to my parents. Its surface was scratched, one leg was slightly darker than the others, and its construction was beautiful and sturdy. I had no intention of replacing it. By the window stood an empty bookcase I'd bought cheaply from a school library that was closing down. It needed cleaning, two shelves reinforced, and its back panel repaired.

I loved objects like that.

They didn't pretend nothing had ever happened to them.

I had just extended the tape measure when the doorbell rang.

Standing on the porch was a man I'd occasionally seen across the street. I recognized his graying hair, dark coat, and habit of walking around with a book tucked under his arm. He was tall, but he didn't seem inclined to use his height to dominate a conversation. He stood half a step back from the door, like someone prepared to respect a refusal.

"Regina Chmiel?" he asked.

"Depends who's asking."

He smiled slowly.

"Mirosław Borek. I live at number seventeen. Halina told me you're organizing book gatherings."

"Did she also tell you I bake cakes?"

"No. She warned me you might not appreciate unexpected visitors."

"Then for once, she got something exactly right."

He laughed softly. His voice was low, with a slight rasp that made even ordinary sentences sound as though they belonged to a longer conversation. He didn't stare at me. His gaze briefly moved to the tape measure in my hand, then to the open dining-room door.

"I've brought a proposal," he said, holding up a slim folder. "But I can come back if I'm interrupting."

I wanted to tell him he was. Not because he really was. Simply because, for the first time in ages, the day belonged entirely to me, and I still hadn't learned how to protect that.

"Five minutes," I decided.

He stepped inside, wiped his shoes thoroughly, and stopped at the threshold of the dining room. I noticed him examining the bookcase, but he made no comment about its condition. Only after a moment did he move closer.

"Beautiful piece of furniture," he said.

"It's crooked."

"That doesn't make it any less beautiful."

I turned my head toward him. The men I'd known usually began by asking whether I needed help moving something heavy. He was looking at an empty bookcase as though he could already imagine the books that would one day fill it.

"Are you a carpenter?"

"A translator. I'm considerably better with words than with wood. But I can recognize something a person hasn't thrown away simply because it no longer looks perfect."

I didn't know why that sentence made me pause. Perhaps it was the way he said it, without trying to impress me. Or perhaps it was because I couldn't remember the last time

someone had spoken about imperfection in my presence without suggesting it needed to be corrected immediately.

Mirosław placed his folder on the edge of the table.

"Mrs. Halina is gathering people interested in the neighborhood meetings. I thought we might do something more than a one-off evening. A small reading club, perhaps a book exchange. I could take care of the texts, choose the reading material, and keep in touch with people."

"And I'd take care of the room, the tea, the cleaning, and making sure everyone was happy?"

He looked at me more carefully.

"I didn't say that."

"I know. These things rarely need to be said."

He was silent for a moment. He didn't look offended, more like someone trying to work out where he'd taken a wrong step in an apparently ordinary conversation.

"You're right that we should agree on responsibilities," he said at last. "I didn't come here looking for a hostess."

"Then who are you looking for?"

He opened his mouth, but the answer didn't come immediately.

That hesitation interested me more than the folder he'd prepared.

"Someone who'd like to have an equal say," he said finally.

I looked at the empty bookcase, then at his hands resting calmly on the tabletop. He hadn't moved my notes or tried to peer into my notebook. He was standing in someone else's

home, leaving me the right to decide how much distance there would be between us.

"Your five minutes are up," I observed.

"I know."

He didn't move, however, until I gestured toward the door. Only then did he collect his folder, without hurrying.

"May I leave you my phone number?" he asked. "You don't have to make any decisions now."

I handed him a pen. He wrote his number on the back of a blank sheet of paper and placed it beside the tape measure. His handwriting was small and even, with a distinctive open lowercase a.

On his way out, he noticed the damaged lock on the upstairs door.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"Mine," I replied.

He nodded.

"I understand. Goodbye, Mrs. Chmiel."

When I closed the door behind him, I felt a peculiar sense of something missing. He hadn't tried to persuade me. He hadn't offered to fix the lock or assured me that everything would be easier if I let him take charge. He'd simply left me with a proposal I was free to like or dislike.

I returned to the dining room. The piece of paper with his number lay on the table beside my plan, drawn out to the nearest centimeter. Through the window, I watched Mirosław crossing the street. He stopped beside an elderly neighbor, picked up the apples that had spilled from her

shopping bag, handed the bag back to her, and continued on his way.

He didn't wait to be thanked.

I moved the piece of paper closer to my notebook.

I longed for a home where nobody would need more from me than I willingly chose to give. And yet, for the first time in many weeks, the silence no longer seemed like nothing but a reward.

I stood beside the empty bookcase, holding the phone number of a man I barely knew between my fingers, and asked myself a question I didn't yet have the courage to answer:

Could I let someone into my life without surrendering the space I was only just beginning to reclaim?

Chapter 1 - The Terms of an Open Door

The following morning, I discovered that the hardest part of reclaiming your own life wasn't making decisions. It was accepting that other people had ideas of their own.

Mrs. Halina called at 8:17, just as I was applying the first coat of French polish to a restored chair. I answered the phone with my elbow because both my hands were occupied and the device was lying on the workshop windowsill. The woman on the other end wasted no time on greetings.

"Regina, dear, we've already got eight people! Actually, nine, because Mrs. Teresa wants to bring her sister. I thought that since we're getting started, we ought to do things properly."

Whenever Halina used the word properly, it invariably meant someone else was about to have a great deal of work to do.

"That's wonderful," I replied cautiously. "But we agreed we'd discuss the ground rules first."

"Exactly why I've called a little meeting. Today at five. At your place, of course, since that's where our little library is going to be."

I stopped moving the polishing pad.

"You've arranged a meeting in my house without asking my permission?"

"Oh, don't use that tone. You were the one who suggested the whole thing."

I looked at the chair. The dark walnut color was regaining its depth, and the fine scratches were gradually disappearing beneath my fingers. What I liked about working with wood was its predictability. Every action had a consequence, every mistake left a mark that could be understood. People were different. They could turn your suggestion into an obligation before you'd even finished speaking.

"Halina, the meeting can go ahead, but I won't be preparing a reception. And I'll have to stop working at five."

"Wonderful. I knew you'd agree."

She hung up before I could clarify precisely what I'd agreed to.

For a moment I stood motionless. Then I put down the polishing pad, washed my hands, and took out my notebook. On a clean page, I wrote in large capital letters:

MY RULES ARE NOT REQUESTS.

It wasn't a particularly elegant sentence, but it brought me relief.

By five o'clock, six people were sitting in my dining room, two were standing beside the window, and Mrs. Halina was enthusiastically arranging cups she'd taken from my sideboard herself. She'd brought poppy-seed cake, Mrs. Teresa had supplied shortbread biscuits, and Mr. Antoni, a retired history teacher, had arrived with a bag of books and the firm conviction that any undertaking without the classics of Polish literature was pointless.

Mirosław Borek was the last to arrive.

He wasn't wearing the coat I remembered from the previous day. His navy-blue sweater and pale shirt made

him look less formal and, at the same time, more interesting. The gray strands at his temples emphasized the character of his face. He greeted everyone, but gave me a separate nod, as though he remembered that I was the one who decided whether he was welcome.

"I've brought only myself," he said quietly as I offered him a chair. "I thought that might be safer than another folder."

"That depends on what's going on inside your head."

"Unfortunately, considerably more than I could fit into a folder."

I smiled despite myself.

Halina clapped her hands.

"Everyone, let's begin! Regina is generously letting us use her wonderful home, Mirek knows all about books, and I'll handle the organizing. I think meetings every Wednesday would be ideal."

"Before we settle on Wednesday, there's something I'd like to make clear," I said.

Every pair of eyes turned toward me.

I wasn't a shy person. I ran my own business, negotiated prices with clients, and could refuse to carry out an irreversible repair even for an extremely influential collector. Yet sitting at a table surrounded by neighbors, I felt a familiar tension. This wasn't about competence. It was about whether I was allowed to be less accommodating than other people expected.

"I want us to create a place where people can talk about books," I began. "But this is still my home. It won't be open without limits. Meetings can take place twice a month, not every week. Everyone will be responsible for cleaning up

after themselves. And I don't intend to cook or prepare refreshments for the entire group."

Halina raised her eyebrows.

"Regina, dear, nobody's trying to take advantage of you."

"Then agreeing on some rules shouldn't be a problem."

Silence fell.

Mirosław was sitting opposite me. He wasn't smiling. He'd been turning a pen between his fingers, but when our eyes met, he laid it on the table.

"Regina is right," he said. "But I'd suggest taking it one step further."

I braced myself for an objection.

"I'm listening."

"If this is going to be a shared undertaking, we can't base it entirely on one person's private home. We need rules that will allow the project to continue even when our hostess wants to go away, work, or simply close her door."

It sounded reasonable. Too reasonable for me to object immediately.

"What do you propose?"

"A small organizing committee. Three people, taking turns being responsible for the meetings. We can begin here, but from the outset we should look for another location as well, perhaps a room made available by the neighborhood association."

Halina looked disappointed.

"But it's so cozy here."

"Which is precisely why it's easy to mistake someone's hospitality for a permanent service," Mirosław replied.

I studied him more closely.

He could simply have supported my conditions. Instead, he'd introduced his own, more difficult one: if we wanted to create something together, we had to share responsibility from the beginning. And that meant I wouldn't be able to make every decision about what happened within the project.

"I don't want anyone rearranging my home," I said.

"Nor should anyone. But if it's going to be a neighborhood book club, the others must have a say in creating its program. Otherwise, we'll simply be guests at your private evenings."

"You don't sound like a man who readily accepts other people's rules."

"That depends on whether they've been established sensibly."

A note of amusement entered his voice.

"And mine aren't sensible?"

"They are. They're essential. Just not quite complete yet."

I couldn't remember the last time someone had disagreed with me without immediately making me feel the need to defend myself. Mirosław wasn't trying to win the conversation. He was interested in finding a solution, even if that meant I had to compromise.

Mr. Antoni leaned across the table.

"Could we perhaps decide what we're actually going to read? Because if we start with organizing everything, we won't open a single book before December."

Everyone burst out laughing, and the tension dissolved.

For the next forty minutes, we discussed the details. Teresa suggested a book exchange, Antoni proposed short introductions to selected authors, and a younger neighbor named Marta wanted to create a simple online group. Halina, having recovered her enthusiasm, volunteered to collect suggestions for meeting dates.

Mirosław wrote down our decisions, occasionally asking for my opinion. He didn't do it ostentatiously. He simply remembered that every arrangement involving my home required my consent.

When the conversation turned to the bookcase, Mrs. Teresa suggested that her brother-in-law could quickly paint it white.

"No," I answered far too sharply.

Everyone fell silent.

I walked over to the piece of furniture and ran my hand along its side.

"This is an old solid-wood bookcase. It has some minor damage, but its original surface is still intact. White paint would cover everything that gives it character. I can restore it. I just need time."

"Of course," Teresa said, visibly embarrassed. "I only wanted to help."

"I know. I'm sorry about my tone."

Mirosław stood and came closer.

"How much time?"

"A few days, if I don't have any other commissions."

"And if you do?"

"Then longer."

"Excellent. We can hold the first meeting without a finished bookcase."

I looked at him.

"An unfinished room doesn't bother you?"

"What would bother me more is someone ruining a good piece of furniture just to have it ready by Thursday."

For a fraction of a second, we stood too close for the conversation to feel entirely professional. I caught the scent of his cologne, discreet, with notes of cedar and something citrusy. Mirosław was the first to step back, leaving me room.

He did it so naturally that it took me a moment to recognize my own disappointment.

When the meeting ended, the neighbors began collecting the dishes. Halina tried once more to establish a menu for the next gathering, but Marta reminded her of our agreement. I watched with quiet satisfaction. For the first time, somebody else was protecting the boundaries I'd established.

Mirosław remained at the table, organizing his notes.

"I'd like to see what you've written," I said.

He handed me the sheet.

At the top were the words: Book Gatherings — A Shared Project. Beneath them he'd listed proposed dates, areas of responsibility, and questions that still required decisions. Beside my name, there was no mention of the word hostess. Instead, he'd written: Regina — premises, furnishings, decisions concerning the house.

Beside his own name: Mirosław — program, communication with participants, documentation.

"You're very organized," I observed.

"An occupational hazard. A translator who doesn't pay attention to meaning can do quite a lot of damage."

"And someone who pays too much attention to meaning?"

"Sometimes fails to notice what another person is trying to say between the lines."

He looked at me, then closed his notebook.

I didn't know whether that observation concerned him, me, or both of us.

"I don't like surprises," I said.

"I noticed."

"And I have no intention of giving up my workshop or changing my plans simply because someone likes my house."

"I don't expect you to."

"And yet you're proposing something over which I won't have complete control."

He considered his answer for a moment.

"Yes. Because a community begins where one person's exclusive right to make every decision ends. But your home remains your home. Those are two different things."

He spoke calmly, without a trace of condescension. That was precisely what made me want to continue the discussion rather than end it.

"Do you always have an answer ready?"

"No. Yesterday, for example, I didn't."

I remembered his hesitation when I'd asked whom he was actually looking for.

"And today I still don't have an answer to everything," he added.

I smiled.

"This might be the beginning of a sensible collaboration."

"That sounds like remarkably cautious praise."

"You'd better get used to it."

I walked him to the door. He paused on the threshold as though he wanted to say something else. For a brief moment, I saw an uncertainty in his face that he hadn't shown before.

"I have Saturday afternoon free," he began. "We could discuss the program in more detail. Without the entire group, it would be easier to establish what we both expect."

"I work on Saturdays."

"I understand."

He didn't ask what time I'd finish. He didn't suggest coming to my workshop. Instead, he reached for his coat.

His restraint was polite, but it irritated me unexpectedly.

"I'm free on Sunday after four," I said.

He turned back.

"Sunday works for me."

"Organizational matters only."

"Of course."

He had the kind of smile that didn't undermine the seriousness of what was being said, but somehow gave the words an additional meaning.

After he left, I stood by the door for a while, listening to his footsteps fading away. I didn't feel like a woman who'd

just agreed to another neighborhood obligation. I felt more like someone who'd opened a small window in a room that had been unbearably stuffy for a long time.

The next day, my daughter Natalia called.

"Mum, I heard from Mrs. Halina that you're organizing some kind of book club. Apparently everyone's delighted."

"Everyone except me, when they try to arrange my schedule."

Natalia laughed.

"So nothing's changed."

I fell silent.

"No, darling. That's exactly what I'm trying to do. Change things."

There was a brief pause on the other end.

"That's good," she said finally. "Really good."

We talked a little longer about her job, her new apartment, and her weekend plans. When we hung up, I returned to the dining room. Mirosław's notes were still lying on the table. I picked them up and read them again.

At the bottom of the page, he'd added a sentence I hadn't noticed before:

No meeting is more important than a homeowner's right to their own time.

I didn't know whether he'd written it for me or for himself.

What I did know was that I intended to ask him about it on Sunday.

That evening, I tried to read, but every few pages my thoughts returned to our conversation beside the bookcase. Not to his face, although I could remember it effortlessly.

Not even to his voice, which had a peculiar softness whenever he stopped arguing a point.

I kept thinking about the fact that he hadn't tried to make me feel needed.

And perhaps that was precisely why I was beginning to want him to come back.

Chapter 2 - A Place at the Table

On Sunday at a quarter to four, I stood in front of my bedroom mirror, wondering why choosing a sweater had suddenly become such a problem.

After all, I was only meeting a neighbor to discuss the book club. I wasn't going on a date, I wasn't planning a romantic dinner, and I had no intention of impressing a man I'd known for only a few days. Nevertheless, I put aside the gray turtleneck because it seemed too severe and chose a soft burgundy sweater with a wide neckline instead.

Then I decided that the very fact I was thinking about it was ridiculous.

Fortunately, there was nobody around to hold me accountable.

Mirosław rang the doorbell at exactly four. This time he was carrying a paper bag and a small book with a navy-blue cover.

"Before you object, there's nothing here that requires any preparation," he said by way of greeting.

I looked inside the bag. Two slices of cheesecake in a box and some loose-leaf tea.

"You've brought refreshments?"

"I've brought dessert for two people. There's a fundamental difference."

"I see you're capable of turning every expression to your own advantage."

"Translators can be dangerous."

I let him inside.