

Mrs Beatty's Bungalow

a short story by Maggie Handsley

Fred saw the 'For Sale' sign as he rounded the corner at the top of the hill. He caught his breath. That'll do me, he thought. He'd kept an eye out for a likely property in his daily rambles round the neighbourhood, and this looked to be just what he wanted.

The bungalow was pleasingly symmetrical with a central doorway and bay windows on either side. The close-cropped lawn was neatly bisected by a flagged path and in the centre of each square patch was a small square bed of lively spring flowers.

'Yes!' said Fred, out loud. He fumbled in his pocket for a pen and wrote down the agent's number on the back of his hand. 'That'll do me nicely.'

He knocked on the door at the appointed time.

'Yes?' Mrs. Beatty appeared in the doorway, a little bird of a woman wearing a flowery pinafore. For a moment, it seemed to Fred that she was caught up in a swirl of sunlight.

'I've got an appointment to view the house,' said Fred. 'It's for sale, isn't it?'

'It's for sale alright,' she said, 'but it's not a house, it's a *bungalow*.' She invested the word with a status that Fred had never considered before. He began to lose his nerve.

'It's a grand garden,' he gabbled. 'I'm a great one for gardening.' Mrs. Beatty arranged her face into a beaming smile. A passing ray of sunshine caught Fred on the back of the neck. The warmth spread into his shoulders and coursed down his back. He relaxed.

'Well, then, you'd better come and have a look round.' Fred stepped into the heady atmosphere of carbolic soap and Dettol with the innocence of a housefly broaching the edges of a spider's web. Half an hour later he emerged feeling better than he had in years.

When Fred returned the next day, just to make sure it was what he really wanted, Mrs Beatty made him a cup of tea and offered him a slab of her all-in-one fruitcake. Then she invited him to Sunday dinner.

Fred arrived at half past twelve. He thought it a likely time. Not too early and not too late.

'Dinner's ready!' Mrs Beatty greeted him. He followed her into the dining room that seemed to Fred to be filled with a faint cloud of glitter hanging in the air. He

decided it was the effect of the sunlight on the particles stirred up by Mrs Beatty's energetic cleaning. The mahogany table was covered with a sparkling damask cloth and nicely set for two. Fred was well placed to see the garden. Neatly edged by parallel privet hedges, it looked longer than he remembered, quite extensive in fact. The French window was surrounded by tubs of lavender, mint, rosemary and thyme. A straight and narrow path led down the length of the garden, past regular columns of phlox, lupins and iris, all vigorously preparing for summer, to a distant bed of Michaelmas daisies. It was a picture.

Mrs Beatty appeared with a steaming bowl of asparagus soup. Next came a plate of thick sliced beef in rich, smooth gravy. There were puffs of melt-in-the-mouth Yorkshire puddings, crisp roast potatoes, steamed cauliflower and broccoli, sweet garden peas and a thick horseradish sauce. When, at last, Fred sat back content, Mrs Beatty launched herself into a flurry of business, tidying away the plates and dishes and reappearing with a covered dish, held in a thick white oven cloth. She placed it in the centre of the table and, pausing to make sure it had the attention it deserved, removed the lid with a flourish.

'Rice pudding! I haven't had rice pudding like that since my missis died.' Fred sniffed at the whiffs of nutmeg, cloves and something else he couldn't quite put his finger on.

'It's got sultanas in you know,' said Mrs Beatty, pressing home her advantage. Fred ate his pudding with relish and then found room for more. Mrs Beatty smiled. A blackbird in the privet started singing.

Sitting in the armchair by the window, sipping his tea, Fred felt moved to tell Mrs Beatty about his circumstances. She nodded and smiled until there was not much left to tell.

'So, you don't like living with your daughter, she summarised succinctly, 'and you miss your garden. How sympathetic she was, how understanding. Fred took out his blue checked hanky and wiped his eyes. There was no doubt about it; he would buy the bungalow.

'My daughter won't like it,' he said, shaking his head. 'She says I'm not fit to be on my own.' The realisation dawned on him as soon as he spoke the words. That was exactly what he would be, on his own. Who would look after him? His daughter's house was noisy, cold and disorganised but she cooked three meals a day and kept the washing machine churning. He looked round Mrs Beatty's cosy room and, as he digested the best meal he could remember, and thought about the long days he could spend in the picture-book garden, the germ of an idea

planted itself in the fertile recesses of his imagination.

'Oh, Dad!' He was right. His daughter didn't like it. 'You know you shouldn't be gardening with your angina. You should take it easy.' She carried on and on until the children, sensing the tension, stopped their noisy play and began whimpering. 'Now look what you've done!' Fred was on the point of giving in when the oldest child stuck a malevolent tongue out at him. He gathered up his dignity and left.

To Fred's pleasant surprise, Mrs Beatty had readily agreed to become Mrs Bottomly. She had made all the arrangements; sorting out the registry office, insurances, wills, that sort of thing. She was very energetic. All Fred had to do was to sign. It proved to be a most amicable arrangement. The long summer days spent in the garden were the most satisfying of his life. He'd thought he might have some persuading to do to convince his new wife of the necessity of a few minor alterations but no, she readily agreed to the rustic archway over the front gate and garden seats either side of the lawn. It was just the idea of a summerhouse at the bottom end of the back garden she didn't like.

'Oh, no,' she shook her head, 'it wouldn't be right.'

As the days grew shorter, Fred spent more time indoors. His favourite place was the chair by the dining room window where he could best appreciate the fruits of his labours. Mrs Bottomly brought him the newspaper after breakfast and cleaned round him, polishing the furniture to a shine. She brought him nice cups of tea and slices of all-in-one fruitcake and, at twelve o'clock, she brought him dinner. That was the best part of the day. His daughter came now and then, when she wasn't run off her feet, to keep an eye on him.

'You're slowing down, Dad,' she said. 'Look at you; you're putting weight on. You should go for walks like you used to.' Fred smiled dismissively. He got plenty of exercise in the garden when the weather was warm enough. Mrs Bottomly brought them a pot of tea and a plate of maids of honour. His daughter pulled a long face. 'All that fat!' she hissed, when Mrs Bottomly was fetching a jug of hot water, 'She's poisoning you.' None the less, she ate a maid of honour and then was persuaded to have another.

For some reason, His daughter's words played on Fred's mind. You're going soft in the head, he thought. But the word 'poison' haunted his imagination. He began to find his food less appealing and suffered bouts of indigestion.

'Look at you,' said his daughter. She'd started visiting more often. 'You're losing weight. You should see a doctor,' she fretted.

'I'll get out in the garden again,' said Fred. 'It does me good, gives me an appetite.'

As it happened, the weather took a turn for the better. The mornings were bright and fresh and Fred took to deadheading with renewed vigour. His foolish fancies disappeared and his appetite improved. Mrs Bottomley's humour improved along with it.

'I'm glad to see you eating again,' she sniffed, 'I was beginning to think there was something wrong with my cooking.' She allowed herself to be reassured and Fred ate a bit extra just to please her.

The Michaelmas daisies had been particularly splendid that year. Even his daughter had remarked on their vigour. The brilliant colour had seemed to reverberate in the golden sunlight. Many a time Fred had enjoyed them from his window.

'I'll do the Michaelmas daisies today,' he decided one morning when the weather was particularly mild. 'They're long past their best. I'll cut away the dead stuff and they'll be all the better next year.'

He worked longer than he intended. Mrs Bottomly was already calling him for his dinner.

'It's been a grand morning!' he told her. 'This is the time of year when you do your real gardening. When you're putting something back.' As he spoke these words of fulfilment, he clutched at his midriff and keeled over, dead.

After the funeral, Mrs Bottomly and Fred's daughter went back to the bungalow together. Fred's daughter had yet to see her father's will. As Mrs Bottomly unlocked the mahogany bureau in the dining room, Fred's daughter was struck how dark and pokey the room was.

'Of course, he left everything to me,' Mrs Bottomly said, handing her a plain brown envelope. Her face was a picture of pious satisfaction. 'I'll bury his ashes in the garden. He loved the garden. I'll put them with the others in the Michaelmas daisies. They might as well do a bit of good.'

'Others?' Fred's daughter gasped, 'What others?'

'Husbands,' said Mrs Bottomly, 'three of them. All heart attacks.'

A week later, Fred's daughter noticed the 'For Sale' sign up again.