

Sometime in the early summer, a stranger will come and take up residence in our house. Although we have not met him, we know he will be bald, incontinent, speechless, and nearly completely unable to help himself. We don't know exactly how long he will stay, relying entirely on us for food, clothing, and shelter.

Our situation reminds me that a leathery-skinned old Indian gentleman once spent several months with my sister in London. At first he slept in a tent in her back yard. Then he moved into the house. Here he made it his project to rearrange the many books in the house, which were in no particular order. He decided upon categories—mystery, history, fiction—and surrounded himself with clouds of smoke from his cigarettes as he worked. He explained his system in correct but halting English to anyone who came into the room. Several years later he died suddenly and painfully in a London hospital. For religious reasons, he had refused all treatment.

This Indian visitor of my sister's also reminds me of another old man—the very old father of a friend of mine. He had once been a professor of economics. He was old and deaf even when my friend was a child. Later he could not contain his urine, laughed wildly and soundlessly during his daughter's wedding, and when asked to say a few words rose trembling and spoke about Communism. This man is now in a nursing home. My friend says he is smaller every year.

Like my friend's father, our visitor will have to be bathed by us, and will not use the toilet. We have appointed a small, sunny room for him next to ours, where we will be able to hear him if he needs help during the night. Someday, he may repay us for all the trouble we will go to, but we don't really expect it. Although we have not yet met him, he is one of the few people in the world for whom we would willingly sacrifice almost anything.