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THE KITCHEN MADONNA

RUMER GODDEN

Illustrated by Lydia Halverson

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BATHGATE

SAN FRANCISCO

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For Elizabeth Rumer

THE CHILDREN did not like it that Marta was unhappy.

“Well, she chose to come, didn’t she?” said Janet.

“Haven’t you ever chosen to do something and not liked it at all?” asked Father, and Janet had to admit she had. Gregory had not. “But then Greg hardly ever does anything,” Janet could have said. Gregory was a quiet boy, always first in his class at school but oddly out of things at home. “He puts himself out of things,” Janet would have said and Mother complained, “Gregory keeps himself to himself.”

Then Marta had come to help in the house—"Help! She *is* the house," Gregory might have said—and from the first he had taken an interest in her, which was strange because he had taken none at all in the much younger Danish Tove and French Babette who had preceded her. "But Tove was so good at games; she could play with you," said Mother. Gregory did not like games. "And Babette was so happy." Babette's happiness had made Gregory more quiet than ever.

Marta neither played games nor was happy. She was from the Polish Ukraine, "And no wonder she's sad," said Mother. "Think of the history of her country." But Gregory thought Marta's sadness had nothing to do with her country, it was of now; though Marta was in late middle age and Gregory was a small boy, he too sometimes felt that brooding unhappiness, especially at twilight, "When Mother is still out," he might have said, only he preferred to keep that thought to himself.

"He never hugs you as Janet does," and Mother sighed. "He's so wrapped up in himself that sometimes I wonder

if he has a heart—and he’s so possessive.” It was true that Gregory was almost fiercely possessive; no one, except Janet now and then if she asked permission, was allowed into his Loft; no one must touch his things—his ship picture, his books, his birthday watch, or his cat Rootle. Rootle was called Rootle because Gregory had found him as a starving kitten rootling in a dustbin; he was Gregory’s, not Father’s or Mother’s or Janet’s. But, from the first day Marta came, Gregory let her stroke Rootle, even feed him and pick him up.

Marta was a boon to Mother. “She’s the best help we have ever had,” said Mother. Mother and Father, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, were both busy architects, which made hard work for Mother, who had the children to look after and the house to run besides the office; often she was kept late, or else had to go away to inspect a house or site and then she worried. Marta had only been with them three months but already Mother was looking less harried. Marta was tireless, clean, and a beautiful cook, “Though she does give you children rather too rich and

spicy foods.” But, “Borsch and goulash, yummy!” said Janet and, “Stay with us forever,” she begged. If Marta wished, she could stay; she had not come for a year like Babette and Tove and, “We’re so tired of changes,” said Gregory. Ever since he could remember, the changes had been continuous; as soon as they got used to one person she went and another came—“One after the other,” Gregory could have said.

To Gregory, the important thing about Marta was that she was always there. When they came down in the morning, Marta was in the kitchen making coffee and toast, putting out bowls of cereal, heating rolls, setting the table with honey and milk. When they came in from school she had their tea ready on the kitchen table and to Gregory it was inexpressibly lovely to come home knowing the house would be lit and welcoming instead of dark, forsaken, with a note telling them to go next door. When they went to bed they knew the house was safe because Marta was downstairs in the kitchen getting dinner ready. She put her own plate on a newspaper at

one end of the kitchen table. "Marta! You must have a tablecloth," cried Mother when she discovered this but, "I like newspaper. I try read new words," said Marta. When she had washed up, she went quietly up to bed in her room next to Gregory's and Janet's bedrooms.

"But don't you want to go out?" asked Mother.

"I go out," Marta answered in her slow way. After years in England she still spoke English haltingly. "I go to the shop, take knitting in the Gardens. Where else?" asked Marta. She did go to church on Sundays but this was early in the morning before the family was up. It was peaceful and, "Steady," said Gregory, not continually upsetting as it had been with Tove and Babette, who were always wanting to go out, so that complicated arrangements had to be made for Gregory and Janet and they felt "like incubi," said Gregory, using one of his special words. Mrs. Peebles, the daily woman, had to come in and sit with them, which made them feel they were babies, or he and Janet were sent to spend the evening with friends—"Not my friends," said Gregory; or else Teresina, the Italian

cook next door, kept an eye on them—and when they were alone in the big house, it felt even bigger and more lonely. Holidays were worse, because then it went on all day. “Always being fobbed off on people,” said Gregory. It was not only this; Tove and Babette had brought their friends to the house. “We were *invaded*,” said Gregory; sometimes he used odd expressions for a nine-year-old boy. “Invaded.”

“But it’s nice to have people,” Mother told him. Gregory did not think it nice. With Tove and Babette the house had not felt like the Thomases’ own; with Marta it did, “Because there’s no one here but us,” said Gregory. Without thinking, he included Marta when he said “us.” Marta, it appeared, did not want friends. The old lady she had worked for in the country had died. “Me there twenty-two years,” said Marta.

Twenty-two years! “That’s ages,” said Janet. Long, long before they were born, more than twice as long.

“You must have liked it, to stay so long,” said Gregory jealously.

“No, not like,” said Marta.

“Then why did you stay?” demanded Janet.

“Old lady, ill. She need Marta,” said Marta, as if that settled it.

“We need you too,” said Janet, and the whole of Gregory longed to say that as well: “We need you. Stay with us forever.” But he was tongue-tied and Mother filled him with dread when she sighed and said, “I’m afraid it’s too lonely for Marta.”

“Make it less lonely,” said Gregory. He meant it as a plea, but it sounded like a growl and Mother did not answer. Besides, how could she make it less lonely? Marta was so heavy and slow, her clothes so old-fashioned, that the other maids and cooks and mother’s helps in the Square laughed at her. It seemed too that she did not want to make friends, not even with genial Teresina, who talked enough for two; when Marta saw Teresina she popped back into the kitchen like a rabbit into its hole. Gregory did the same.

“It’s no good forcing her,” said Mother, and soon it was

settled that when the family was out, Marta was content to be with Rootle.

Marta and Rootle had both suffered from the world; Marta, Mother said, had been a refugee from her village, driven out by soldiers, and had never seen her mother and father or any of her people again. Rootle had been driven out too, but unlike Marta, he was skinny, perhaps because he had been so starved. Marta limped from a wound—“They shoot at me,” said Marta—and Rootle’s tabby coat had a bald spot where, “Perhaps someone threw boiling water at him,” said Mother. “Oh! Oh!” cried Janet, and Gregory picked up Rootle and held him tightly. One of Rootle’s ears, which must have been cuffed or injured, had grown crooked. Marta, though, thought Rootle beautiful, as Gregory did, and she used to talk to him: “*Moja kicia. Kicia*, my kitty. Kitty,” she would say, though Rootle was by no means a kitten. “*Moja kicia*,” and Rootle would purr. Sometimes he answered with a “miaow” but there was something wrong with Rootle’s miaow; when

he opened his mouth, only a ghost of a sound came out, hoarse and stifled, as if those days of being out in the cold and wet had hurt his throat. “But now,” said Marta, “he has beautiful big home, *moja kicia*.”

The home was big; Gregory’s Loft was in the roof and had the house cistern in its corner; the cistern made gurgling noises that seemed company for him when he worked. On the next floor were the children’s two bedrooms—Janet’s was the old nursery—with Marta’s bedroom next to them. The floor below was Mother and Father’s, with their bedroom, dressing room, and two workrooms; below that again was the drawing room and the dining room; in the basement Marta had her own sitting room next to the kitchen, but she always sat in the kitchen. “Why, Marta? In your room there’s television and a comfortable chair.”

“I like kitchen,” said Marta. “In my home,” she told the children, “only one room, and that room kitchen.”

“One room for everyone to sit in?” asked Janet.

“Sit, cook, eat, wash, sleep, everythings,” said Marta.

“In a kitchen like this?” asked Janet, marveling. And she asked, “Where were the beds?”

“No like this,” said Marta. “No cooker, only big oven, big, big, big! On top of oven big bed all childrens sleep.”

“On top of the *oven*?” asked Gregory and Janet together. “But wasn’t it too hot?” asked Gregory. “Didn’t they get burnt?”

“Oven have many, many bricks all round. Bricks keep it not too hot; nice, warm,” said Marta. “I sleep there when I little. One side of room, big wooden bed, Father and Mother sleep; mattress straw and there is big pillow, many, many pillow, beautiful pillow.” Marta’s green eyes were shining. “White linen cases my mother spin, all embroidered red. Other side room, wood table, chairs, stools to sit and eat. Only one window, so little that room always little dark, but fire it shine, pans they shine. Floor is earth,” said Marta and suddenly, as if she were dazed, she looked round the expensive London kitchen with its

white paint, white tiles, pale blue Formica, white enamel, silver chromium. “Not like this,” said Marta. “Not at all.” Mother had planned the kitchen herself. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” she had said when she showed it to Marta, but Marta had said nothing, in a silence which was curiously like Gregory’s.

Since Marta came, the kitchen was not quite as beautiful. She brought in a sagging old armchair she had found in the attic lumber room next to Gregory’s Loft.

“Why that old chair, Marta?”

“I like,” said Marta.

Rootle’s basket appeared—“Doesn’t Gregory mind?” asked Mother again—but he did not seem to mind. A row of plants stood in odd saucers and glass jars on the window sill with a wooden box planted with parsley and chives, while strings of onions hung on a nail by the door. Marta’s work basket spilled socks over one of the cabinets and there were always clothes rolled in a damp towel ready for ironing. “I’m afraid Marta’s not very tidy,” said Mother, but Gregory and Janet, especially Gregory, liked

the kitchen far better now. It was warm and cozier. "It's getting filled," Gregory said one day but Marta shook her head. "It empty."

Sometimes, in her blunt way, Marta said such things to Gregory. She could say them to him; Janet, like Mother, would have been a little indignant, but Gregory only opened his gray eyes wide behind his spectacles, showing that he was surprised and interested.

"How can it be empty when it's full of things? More things since you came, Marta."

"It empty," insisted Marta. "Things not fill—here," and she clasped her hands over the bib of her apron. "Kitchen, it feel empty" She might have said more but just then Janet came bouncing in and Marta turned quickly to the pan that was bubbling on the stove.

Gregory never forgot things—"He's like a small elephant," said Father—and a week later, while Gregory, Janet, and Marta were having tea in the kitchen, he took his chance. Marta had made a wonderful cake-tart of apricots glazed with jam and they had eaten and drunk

and laughed. Marta's usually sallow cheeks were quite red; her eyes, which were often so dull, were bright. There was not a trace of sadness in the air until Gregory put down his cup and asked in his small, quiet way, "What did you have in your kitchen, Marta, that we don't have in ours?"

For a moment Marta did not speak. Gregory thought she was going to retreat into her silence, and in a voice that Mother had not heard, and Janet seldom had—"Only when he speaks to Rootle," Janet could have said—a voice that coaxed like a beguiling little flute, he said, "Tell us, please tell us, Marta."

Marta twisted her hands in her apron and her cheeks flushed deeper red. Then, "You have no 'good place,' " said Marta.

"No good What do you mean?" Janet was beginning when Gregory kicked her under the table.

"What is a 'good place,' Marta?"

"In my home, Ukrainian home," said Marta, "we make a good place. In the corner, there," and she pointed to an

angle of the room. "A place on top of cupboard, perhaps, or perhaps on shelf. Little place but it holy because we keep there Our Lady and Holy Child."

"A statue?" asked Janet.

"Not statue."

"A picture then?"

"Not picture." Marta struggled to find words. "Like picture but more beautiful. They in our churches too. Pictures, but pricked with gold," said Marta in a rush.

"*Pricked?*"

"She means crusted," said Gregory.

"Crusted," agreed Marta and the *r* sounded rich. "With gold and stones, pearls, rubies"

"*Real* ones?" asked Janet incredulously.

"Sometimes real, sometimes no. In many churches real," said Marta. "In homes, poor homes, not pearls and rubies. This!" and she went to her work basket and brought out a box. In it were beads, big and little, pale yellow, deeper yellow, and a yellow that was almost brown.

"Amber," said Gregory at once. Gregory knew about

