





SUSAN LIEV TAYLOR

The Magic Rocking Chair

“IT’S NOT FOR SALE,” Ilse told the man who had recently moved into Littletown. He was about fifty, thickset, and wore a rumpled suit. “It’s been in my family four generations, and eventually it will go to my daughter.”

“Surely you must have a price.” Corbin peered inside Ilse’s small plain house. She knew he was looking for her rocking chair. “You could use some new furniture,” he said bluntly.

Ilse saw her slender profile in a nearby mirror. She remembered when the white braid trailing down her back was a rich brown color. It didn’t seem very long ago to her, yet it was.

“I’m going to turn ninety soon,” she said. “I have no interest in new furnishings.”

“You shouldn’t deny yourself the happiness that comes with living well, even at your advanced age,” Corbin said. “The money I give you for your rocking chair will let you buy luxurious sofas and chairs with silk upholstery.”

Ilse knew that Corbin was the late Kendrick Cally’s nephew, his only living relative. He had inherited his uncle’s sprawling mansion and great wealth, and his business in a nearby city.

“I have no need of luxury,” she replied.

“People say your rocking chair rocks away worries and care.” Corbin wrung his hands in frustration. “I have so many worries in my new life. I must have something powerful to soothe them away.”

“Surely your affluence can find you many ways to relax,” Ilse said.

Sometimes Ilse let people who were enduring terrible hardships sit in her rocking chair so that for a while they could find some peace

Opposite:
Marjanna Blackmer.
Watchers in the Wood.
Pen and ink, 1987.

and relief. She was glad they felt better because of it, and they were always very appreciative.

Ilse waited for Corbin to ask to sit in her rocking chair, and she was ready to say no. She hadn't met him before that day, and his bold manner made her feel uneasy.

To her surprise, Corbin did not ask.

"I'll pay you any amount you ask, and even if you don't want part of my fortune, you must know someone who can use it."

"There is no one," Ilse said thinking of her daughter, son-in-law, their grown daughter, her two sons, and felt grateful that none of them had any need of Corbin's money.

"Now go," she said firmly.

"I would take good care of your rocking chair." Beads of sweat formed on Corbin's ruddy face. "I have a special place for it."

So do I, Ilse thought. Without turning around and looking at her rocking chair, she saw the pale gray color of its delicately carved wood. It stood in a corner of her living room facing a small window and the tall trees beyond her tiny yard.

"I won't give up until you sell it to me."

With that, the tousle-haired man strode out to the street.

Ilse looked at her rocking chair and remembered the story her grandmother had told her.

Deneta was a mysterious woman, although not unkind. Still, many of the people where Ilse's great-grandparents lived were afraid of her. For Deneta was extremely tall, wore long black capes, and lived in a cave above the hills. Yet Ilse's great-grandparents had no fear of her, for she gave them potions that cured a variety of sicknesses, including a deep, lingering cough Ilse's great-grandfather had. And on nights Deneta was far away from her cave and needed a place to sleep, Ilse's great-grandparents always gave her hot stew and a comfortable bed.

Then came the night Deneta was walking through the forest and a terrible wind rose up. Knowing a storm would soon come and that she was too great a distance from Ilse's great-grandparents' house to find shelter there, Deneta was left to the mercy of the forest.

"I beg you," Deneta implored the trees. "Let me find sanctuary within the branches before I am drenched with rain, catch a chill, and die."

But all the trees cast deaf ears to Deneta, except for one.

It was smaller than the others. Its bark was torn in many spots up and down the tree's trunk, exposing wood of a whispery shade of gray. Its leafy branches were not nearly as thick and full as the other trees, yet this scrawny tree extended its strongest branch to Deneta. She climbed up, the tree cupped its branches together tightly to

protect her, and she stayed warm and dry during the storm. When it was over, the tree loosened its branches, and Deneta slid gently to the ground.

She gazed at the tree that had shielded her.

“Long after your fellow trees turn to dust, may you bring comfort, joy, and peace to all those who sit upon your fine wood.”

Then Deneta tapped the scraggly tree with her thumb, creating for an instant a bright aqua light that could be seen for miles around.

One year later a fire swept through the forest. Only the tree that had protected Deneta remained standing. The local people became afraid of that tree because Deneta told them how it had given her refuge during the worst storm the area had known in one-hundred years. So, believing the little tree was bewitched, they said it must be chopped down. They also decided to burn the wood, but when it would not catch fire, Ilse’s great-grandfather took the wood home and made a rocking chair from it.

Deneta saw this and rejoiced.

“It will never leave your family,” she said to Ilse’s great-grandparents. She touched the rocking chair, and for a second it glowed with purple light. “For thousands of years to come, it will give great calmness and happiness to all who rest on it.”

Before Ilse went to sit in her unique rocking chair, she watched Corbin turn the corner one block away. She knew he would soon walk past her church, where in one week she would be attending a party honoring her ninetieth birthday.

Don’t come back here if you still think you can own my rocking chair, Ilse thought. Many have tried before you, and none have succeeded.

Then she sat in it and spent the next two hours feeling blissful.

The next morning Ilse watched a young man holding a huge bouquet of orange tulips approach her house. Behind him stood a truckload of red, yellow, pink, and orange tulips.

“For you, Miss Ilse,” the young man said, handing her the gorgeous flowers. He gestured to the sea of blossoms in his truck that awaited planting in Ilse’s garden. “That bouquet and every tulip here are gifts from Corbin Cally. Also from Mr. Cally is myself in service to you as gardener of all these fine flowers.”

Ilse recognized the young man. He was the son of the town florist, who knew how much Ilse loved orange tulips.

“Take all of them away, Rowan. Including this bouquet. I have no need of flowers from Mr. Cally.”

This, Ilse soon saw, was only the beginning.

Sweet cakes, fresh seafood, and countless other delicacies were brought to her door. Among these treats was the currant bread Ilse

was so fond of but could not purchase anywhere in Littletown. With each of these deliveries, Corbin sent a cook and a baker along to prepare meals for Ilse. She declined their services, and all the foods were sent back.

Ilse also refused satin brocade sofas and chairs and gold inlaid mahogany tables delivered to her home.

She sent Corbin a note.

No more gifts.

Yet Ilse realized Corbin had no intention of giving up. She sat in her rocking chair, which quickly soothed her with the great love inherent in its wood.

The next morning a young carpenter, who was also Ilse's neighbor, appeared on her doorstep.

"Mr. Cally is having a house built for you. It's going to look like a small palace. Do you want to come see it?"

Ilse frowned. "No, Gerard. This is just another way he has of getting me to sell my rocking chair to him."

"When people tell him no one outside your family can own it, he laughs," Gerard said.

The next few days passed quietly and pleasantly for Ilse because there were no further gifts from Corbin. With a happy heart, she went to her birthday party. This occurred after Sunday's church service. Everyone in Littletown was there.

Ilse watched Corbin Cally mingle easily with its citizens.

"I'm having a good time," he said. "Are you?"

"Yes, very much," she replied.

Corbin's blue eyes stared into Ilse's brown ones.

"I won't give up on owning your rocking chair."

"Nor will I part with it."

Then Corbin offered Ilse a sum of money that made her old bones shake from top to bottom. Some of the townspeople heard it and gasped.

"I can't imagine such a large amount," Ilse said. "Yet you don't understand, my dear Corbin. I couldn't sell my rocking chair to you if I wanted to. It will always stay in my family."

"I've heard the story about Deneta. What nonsense." Corbin walked into the crowd.

At the party there was cake, and there were songs. Lively chatter, jokes, and laughter filled the room. But after a little while Ilse saw that Corbin was missing from the festivities. And because she had a feeling as to what Corbin's intention was, she quietly headed for the door.

"You're leaving now, Miss Ilse?" Gerard said.

Ilse nodded. "After a little rest at home, I'll be back."

She did not want to say that she felt Corbin had gone over to her house to steal her rocking chair.

“Don’t walk home,” Gerard said. “I’ll drive you.”

“You don’t have to leave the party, dear. I live only a block away, and it’s still daylight.”

“Come on, Miss Ilse. You’ll be real comfortable in my old car.”

“Well, that’s very nice of you,” Ilse smiled.

A few minutes later they passed Corbin Cally’s truck.

“Strange he should park it midway between the church and your house,” Gerard said.

Ilse felt her feeling grow into certainty. Surely Corbin was inside her house. Even though it looked no different from the way she left it: windows open, doors closed.

“I’ll walk you inside,” Gerard said.

Though Ilse felt no fear, she agreed.

When they entered her house, she saw Corbin sleeping soundly in her rocking chair. He, like the others who had tried to steal her magical piece of furniture, had exhausted himself trying to move it. But unlike the others, Corbin in his deep slumber wore the biggest, happiest smile Ilse had ever seen. And for a moment, while looking at his profound joy, Ilse wished she could have sold her wonderful rocking chair to him.

SUSAN L. TAYLOR is a published writer of short stories and poetry. She writes greeting card verse and is interested in history and the visual arts.