

The Roofing Man

LAST SUMMER my mother and her sister, Claire, were looking forward to a number of quiet, peaceful days. After all, this was the usual pattern of their life. Mom was 79, and Claire was four years older. They had their house all paid off, the house where Mom and Dad raised us two boys. After Dad died, Claire came to keep Mom company. And they'd gotten along well together during these last sixteen years. So they thought they would have a quiet time and enjoy the warm, upper New York State summer. But they hadn't counted on Mr. Flaherty.

Mom and Claire are religious people. Most of their time outside the house is devoted to church activities. In this way—over the years—they have met a great many people, for theirs is a large congregation. One of the people they noticed in passing was a short, stocky man of about forty-six, Mr. John Flaherty.

Actually, they didn't know his name until that day he appeared in their driveway in his pick-up truck. Whenever an unheralded stranger appeared at their door, Mom and Claire would get immediately flustered. They rarely knew what to do with strangers, especially sales people. They never wanted to be impolite or unkind, so they always showed an interest in what the person was saying. And, of course, this gave the sales people the impression that Mom and Claire would buy something.

In any case, Mom and Claire had practically no sales resistance. I'm not actually sure, however, that's the best phrase. At the last moment, they usually resisted buying whatever it was—simply because they didn't have much money. But they never seemed to realize that the time to say "No" to the salesman was during the first two minutes.

I vividly remember one early evening years ago when a vacuum cleaner salesman announced himself at our front door. Somehow my mother couldn't refuse him at the outset. So the poor man carried from his car about five boxes and his vacuum cleaner. These items he carefully stacked in our living room. After discussing the wonderful array of attachments and what they could do, he thought he had my mother sold. So he continued with the next phase: his demonstration. After a considerable to-do, he smilingly showed Mom her shining-clean carpet. After this one-hour presentation, it was tough for Mom to find the words to refuse the guy. But since she didn't have \$500 in ready cash, she did turn him down.

There had been many such escapades over the

years. Mom and Claire had gone through their share of salespeople. There had been all sorts of magazine salesgirls, encyclopedia salesmen, Fuller Brush people, and cosmetic saleswomen. Whatever American sales genius had devised to sell door-to-door probably made its way sooner or later to my mother's house. You might think that the ladies would be rather brusque with salespeople after these experiences, but they remained sensitive to other people's feelings. They didn't want to hurt anyone.

So the day arrived when they found Mr. Flaherty's truck in their drive. It was a bright green pick-up with the lettering "Flaherty—General Contracting" painted on its doors.

When Mr. Flaherty introduced himself to my mother, he knew what he was about. "I'm John Flaherty, Mrs. Ryan. I know you from church."

"Oh, of course," said my mother. "I recognize you now, you're the young man who always sits behind us on the right side." This made Mr. Flaherty an upright man in my mother's eyes. She never suspected people anyway, and if you were a church-goer, then you must be a morally upright person in every area of your daily life. Mom had her blind spots when it came to the business world.

Flaherty got right to it. "In driving by your house, Mrs. Ryan, I noticed that a few of the shingles on your roof are pulling up around your dormer window. Now usually that's a sign of wear in your roof. Of course, it may be nothing serious, but I thought I should let you know because I wouldn't want you to get water damage in your upstairs and perhaps in your ceilings."

This suggestion automatically sent my mother into one of her anxiety attacks. And my Aunt Claire, who came immediately to her side, was no better. They kept their small house in impeccable condition, and the thing they feared most was any kind of serious damage. For them, a water-stained ceiling would be a disaster.

So my mother said to Mr. Flaherty, "Do you think you could take a look at the roof for us and let us know how bad it is?"

"Well," said Flaherty, "I really have other business to attend to today. I have a couple of jobs a few miles down the road, and I just stopped to tell you about your roof so you wouldn't get into any trouble. After all, we have to take care of the people in our church, don't we? We just can't pass by when we notice a problem."

As you see, Flaherty knew the tack to follow with

my mother and aunt. Now they were worried Flaherty wouldn't help them out. This would be a problem because they never seemed to know how to contact workmen to fix things around their house. It was a major enterprise for them to get hold of people to repair things. And that is why my younger brother, Steve—who lived about fifteen minutes away—always took care of such arrangements for them. Steve prided himself on helping out Milly and Claire. He kept a continual eye on the house, the grounds, and their automobile. He had kept close charge of their maintenance for the past ten years.

But in their panic, Mom and Claire forgot all about dutiful Steve. Claire joined in the conversation now. "We'd appreciate it, Mr. Flaherty, if you could take a few minutes to tell us about our roof. We'd be happy to pay you for your time." Claire, you see, prided herself on her business acumen. She figured she could persuade any business person to do work she wanted done.

Of course, Flaherty didn't need much persuading. "Oh, you don't need to pay me anything, Miss O'Neill. I guess I can take a ten-minute break here to look more closely at your roof. My men can look after the other jobs for a few more minutes. I can't let you ladies have water damage problems."

With that anxiety-producing comment, Flaherty got his ladder from the hooks on the side of his pick-up. In seconds, he was up on the roof, inspecting the shingles next to the dormer. Claire and Milly meanwhile were standing in the yard watching his every move.

Flaherty called down, "These shingles around the dormer are all bent up, Mrs. Ryan. It must have been from the snow and ice. They could cause you some problems." Mom's face tightened perceptibly at these words, and Claire began to clasp her hands.

Flaherty scanned the rest of the roof for a minute or two, then climbed back down. "See the way those shingles bend down on the other parts of the roof, Mrs. Ryan. That's a sure sign of wear. I think that within two or three months, water can begin to get under there. I'd have somebody put new shingles on the roof, if it were my house."

Knowing his audience, Flaherty stopped there, and began loading his ladder back on the truck. It seemed to take him a long time to do. Meanwhile, Mom and Claire were talking over the bad news.

"I guess we'd better fix the roof, Milly," said Claire. She always favored immediate responses to a crisis. Claire never was one to ask for time to make a decision.

"I don't know who to get," said my mother. "Mr. Baker retired last December, and he used to do most of our work. I hate to look in the yellow pages because we wouldn't know who we were getting."

"Well, maybe Mr. Flaherty could do it for us," noted Claire. She knew enough to look close at hand for solutions.

Flaherty could hear all this from his truck, but he gave the women another few minutes to talk themselves into their need of his help. Finally, he finished fussing around his ladder and turned to the women.

He said, "Sorry to bring you the bad news, ladies. But it's a good thing that you found out about it now—before the fall rains begin. Is there anything I can do to help you find someone to put a new roof on for you?"

Claire said, "Well, since we know you, Mr. Flaherty, we were wondering if you could do it for us? We don't know anyone else who does this kind of work."

"Oh, I'd like to Miss O'Neill," said Flaherty. "It's just that this is my busiest time of year. I'm already working on two houses down the road."

"We'd appreciate your fitting us in when you can, Mr. Flaherty. The sooner the better," said my mother.

"You know," said Flaherty, "I can see you ladies need help right away, and since I know you from church, I'll see what I can do. I'll talk to one of the ladies down the road who needs work on her house siding. Maybe she can wait a day or two. If that works out, I'll show up here in the morning with my crew and we'll get your new roof on right away. Without delay. How does that sound to you?"

"That will be fine," said Claire. "I just knew things would be okay for us with your help."

Mr. Flaherty smiled graciously, went to his pick-up, got in, and pulled out of the drive. From his open window, he called, "I'll try to be over in the morning, ladies." And off he went.

After he was gone, Claire and Milly remained in the yard for a few minutes, looking at the roof as they walked around the house. "I see what he means," Claire said, "about those shingles bending down. You know, you'd think they would last longer than — uh, seven years. Was it seven years ago we did the roof?"

"Seven years?" said Milly. Let me see. It must have been longer than that. It was before Mary died."

"Mary? She died after Ella did. That was nine years ago. So I guess it was eight years ago we did the roof," said Claire.

"You'd think they'd make roofs to last longer than that, wouldn't you, Claire?" said Milly.

The two sisters then went into the house through the back door. They continued their talk for over an hour, then decided to do their grocery shopping. Thoughts of the roof thus began to fade as their normal routine took over. After lunch, they took their naps and their baths. In late afternoon, they went to the church library to help index books. Then they returned home for a late supper.

After evening prayers and two hours of television, they went to bed.

Usually they slept until about 8:30 a.m. But not this day. At 7:00 sharp they were awakened by noises coming from the roof. Claire was the first one out of bed—wondering whatever could be going on. She ran to the front window and raised the blinds. There was Mr. Flaherty's pick-up. And two other trucks as well.

"Milly, Milly," said Claire. "Mr. Flaherty is working on our roof already. Didn't he say he was going to phone us first?"

Milly joined her at the window in her confusion. Neither of them were quite awake. "Oh, what will we do?" said Milly.

"I guess we can't do anything now that he's already started," said Claire. Thoughts of my brother Steve were far from their minds at this point.

So Mr. Flaherty and his crew replaced the entire roof. And they did it all in one day. No one ever saw a project completed so quickly. He didn't give anyone a chance to reconsider the project.

The next morning after returning from shopping, Claire and Milly saw no more trucks. Instead, they noticed a mess in their yard. There, scattered all around the house were the old shingles. The workers had left them there.

However, my mother and aunt assumed Mr. Flaherty would soon return to pick up the mess. They admired the new roof, although Claire commented, "Those new shingles seem to bend down, too."

But Mr. Flaherty did not return the next day, nor did he come back on the weekend. My mother and aunt began to worry. They always hated disorder in their house and yard, and the shingles were strewn all over the place. So they did what they always did when they were in trouble, they decided (finally) to call my brother, Steve.

They did not expect the furor that Steve was to make about Mr. Flaherty. Of course, in their excitement about Mr. Flaherty's first visit, they had forgotten to say a word to Steve about the roofing project. Unfortunately, Steve has developed something of a temper as he grows older. And he really cut loose when Mom told him she had a brand new roof, also a yard full of old

Sounding

INNERSPACE

Submerged
mountains
valleys
lava flows

Strange life forms
lurking
along a fault
living
without light
without air
feeding
on toxic sulphur
oozing
from the River
of Fire

OUTERSPACE

Scrutinized
they
will die

—MAGGY ANDERSON

shingles. Caramba. The anxiety level went higher and higher.

I never did get all the details concerning the aftermath of Flaherty Day. Milly and Claire do not like to discuss their errors. I did learn that Steve had some rather hot phone conversations with Flaherty, that he stopped payment on Mom's check for awhile, and that Flaherty's crew returned in short order to pick up the mess in the yard. All the rest is silence.

I've learned through the years not to press my relatives on sensitive issues. I wish I thought something like this experience couldn't happen to Milly and Claire again. But what can you do when there are charming people out there going door-to-door—people like John Flaherty?

—A. BRUCE DEAN

