

The More Things Change

The moment I stepped into the house I was struck by a feeling of recognition—and it made no sense, because this was the first time I had set foot in Mary’s new home. At first I thought, *Oh, she’s furnished it like her old house, made the inside similar so it looks the same.* But as soon as I glanced around I saw that wasn’t true. The other place had been spare and white and modern, and here the walls were cluttered with floral paintings and thick blousy curtains; understandable, as it was the only design that made sense in this old two-story house in the middle of nowhere. It even smelled different, like flowers and grass and the leftover wood-smoke scent of a fire. It was almost like someone had recently burned a Country-House-scented candle you might buy at Walmart, one meticulously designed to capture what advertising executives deemed a “homey” scent.

“Hi!” Mary greeted me, smiling. It had been only six weeks since I’d seen my sister last, but she looked slightly different. Her hair was shorter and she was wearing a cardigan rather than her usual business suit. “How’s James?”

“Good, as usual. He got promoted to manager last week, actually,” I added in a rush, barely able to contain my pride. For a second I felt guilty for bragging about my husband’s success, but then again, Mary didn’t exactly have cause to be envious, given that she had just moved to a much bigger house. “So, how’s the new house working out for you and Frank?”

“We love it,” she said, smiling widely, spreading her arms wide as if to embrace the entire room. “There’s so much...well, there’s just so *much* of it! I mean, two stories, with a staircase and everything. And a whole field in my backyard. It’s great, Mary. We finally have room to breathe.” She paused. “You and James should really think about moving out to the country, too. It’s nothing like the suburbs—nothing *at all*. Not a single shopping mall in sight. That’s what makes it so wonderful,” she added quickly, seeing my raised eyebrows. “Really, you get used to it.”

“Well, maybe,” I said, but I knew I would have been unable to function without access to the mall, and my suburban community in general, these past

several years. Where else would Elizabeth have entertained herself with her friends while James and I did the work necessary to keep a roof over our heads? At least Mary wouldn't have that problem, given that it was just her and Frank here. Although I did wonder how she amused herself while Frank was working in the city. Frolic in the fields for ten hours a day?

We went into the sitting room, which my imaginary candle-making executive would no doubt laud as "warm" and "welcoming", and talked for a while. I don't really remember what about, we just talked—which I've always considered the best kind of conversation. I also helped her hang one of Frank's paintings—the last one, she said, giving a wry smile. Was this a taste of what she did on a daily basis? I did some quick calculations and figured that since eight other paintings had been put up so far, and she had been here for three weeks, she'd spent approximately two and a half weeks per painting.

"I'm just going to get some tea," she said, and went to the kitchen, leaving me alone in the room; but I didn't feel alone. How strange that a painting would make me feel that way. I stepped back and examined it, maybe just so I wouldn't feel like it was examining me. It was a weird, stark scene. A huge red dot, probably meant to be a sun, burned above an empty street. I can't explain why I thought it was *a* sun and not *the* Sun. It wasn't just the fact that the size and color were all wrong; artists had represented our Sun for millions of years, in varying degrees of abstraction, and somehow it had always been identifiable. But here, something about it was alien. This sun cast deep shadows over the landscape. I could make out the faint figure of a bicycle in the shadow of a building. The rest of the sky was totally black.

I turned away from the painting, my mind already going to Elizabeth, wondering if she'd packed her pom-poms. And then I remembered that I had to call the repairman to look at our dishwasher, and tried to remember whether he worked on Saturdays. All the while I was aware of that sun burning into my back like an eye.

My sister came back into the room, steam rising in spirals from two cups of tea. I told her I was sorry but I would have to go soon. "Another of Elizabeth's games?" she asked, smiling knowingly.

“Yeah, well...kind of a lot of hoopla for what’s basically just jumping up and down and shrieking, but...”

She listened politely as I babbled on about what had happened at last season’s game, what Elizabeth had said, what she had worn; they were tiny details that would ordinarily be lost in the vacuum of life, but I clung to them. Seized them like pieces of driftwood bobbing by me as I floated adrift in a vast ocean.

As I got up to leave, I almost asked her what the dot in the painting was supposed to represent. The question was on the tip of my tongue, but I was too nervous about what she might say in response. “The Sun, of course! Frank had to look through three astronomy books before he got it right.” How could something so wrong, looking so bloated and evil up there in the sky, be our Sun? I told myself it was silly how much I was thinking about it, so I just said goodbye and went out to the car.

After unlocking the door, I turned back to the house and saw that Mary had moved to sit at the window. She wasn’t facing in my direction but towards the field in the back of the house. The scene jolted me back to when we were very young and she had sat in her rocking chair, looking out the window in much the same way, and when I’d asked her what she was doing she would say in a sing-song voice, *I’m just waiting for my prince to come*. And then sometimes she would actually sing the song, the one from *Snow White*, and I couldn’t remember the lyrics just then but they went something like that. About waiting for someone to come and make everything better.

My phone rang, making me jump. It was James, asking when I’d be at the game. “I’m just getting ready to leave.” I opened the car door as if to prove my point.

Static crackled up and down the line. “Well, hurry, okay, dear? Eliza’ll be upset if her mom misses her first game of the season.”

“Okay,” I said, though I was only half-listening.

*Someday my prince will come*—yes, that was it. And what was the next line? Something about waiting for her dreams to come true? No...maybe that came at the end of the song. It didn’t really matter anyway. The essence was all the same.

I looked back and saw that she was still sitting at the window, staring out across the landscape, chin in her hand. Something cold crept over me and for a moment we were five again, my feet were rooted not to grass but to concrete, and she was staring out at an entirely different setting. Not trees but buildings spiking against the sky. I imagined her singing *Someday my prince will come*, no longer as a five-year-old child but a middle-aged woman, and now I really did feel cold, shivery, like bugs were crawling down my spine. I shook the disturbing image away. Frank hadn't been that prince. Not through of any fault of his; he couldn't help that he wasn't someone's perfect idea of a person, someone to flash across the screen and whisk the princess away to Happily-Ever-After-Land where the Sun was always small and yellow and benign and nothing lurked in the darkness of deserted streets. I think that's when I realized that maybe Mary hadn't been a huge fan of that painting either. Maybe that was why she had left it for last.

I heard her voice again, then, suggesting that James and I move to the country. Even after Elizabeth left for college and I faced an empty room and a dearth of cheerleading games to go to, I doubted that we ever would. It wasn't just the mall that the suburbs offered. It was the familiarity of the roads that led to our street, the noise of the neighbors' kids playing hockey in our street, the knowledge that we could drive down to a PTA meeting and bask in the abundance of baked goods and warm wishes and hear the plans of those whose kids were going to preschool, to school, to college.

And if we moved to the country and into that hypothetical two-story house beside the absolute stillness of a forest or a field, I would be faced with the knowledge that I hadn't exactly found my Happily-Ever-After-Land, either. It would be the same house, I realized, as Mary's. It might be in a different location and look different on the outside, but believe me, it would be the same one on the inside. And once the door swung shut behind me, it would be for good. That house had a way of compressing time. If I entered it again I might never leave, just sit at the window while countless hours and days and weeks unraveled behind me.