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1

Land of Sunshine

It all began one cold January night when I was kneeling in front of my mother's fireplace, drying my hair. Outside, the snow was falling over London, and the footsteps and the noise of the traffic were muffled, but inside my mother's pink bedroom, with the velvet curtains closed and the lamps casting down rosy light, we were very warm and cozy.

I was enjoying myself, for it was one of those very rare evenings when my mother was at home and seemed to have nothing to do except be with me. This was so unusual that at first we had not quite known what to say to each other, but we had watched television, and then she had brought out a pile of magazines full of patterns and had let me choose a new summer dress. After that, she had washed my hair and dried it while I watched in the long mirror and ate chocolates.

It should have been a lovely evening. Mrs. Moody, the housekeeper, had a day off and had gone home to Golders

Green, and the flat somehow seemed brighter without her. I was fond of Mrs. Moody, who looked after me far more than my mother did, but she was not a very cheerful person to have around. She disapproved of Mummy because she went to so many parties and stayed out late at night and got up late in the morning. Mrs. Moody, in her young days, went to bed at ten and got up at six, and no nonsense, but as Mummy usually went to bed at two and got up at ten, I couldn't see that she was really any lazier than Mrs. Moody. They both spent exactly the same number of hours in bed.

Mrs. Moody disapproved of me, too, because she thought I had too many party clothes and too many cream cakes for tea. I had heard her tell the cook in the flat downstairs that I would grow up to be a butterfly like my mother. The cook had replied that, for all my fine clothes, I was a plain little thing; but I didn't understand what she meant.

"Mummy," I said, tossing back my hair and looking up at her, "you still haven't told me what day I'm going back to school. It must be soon now."

My mother was silent for some minutes, and I began to wonder what was the matter. I had asked twice before, and she had changed the subject.

"When, Mummy?" I repeated impatiently. Instead of answering this simple question, my mother suddenly said, "Elaine, would you like to go to the country?"

I twisted my head around and stared at her. "The country?" I repeated. "Why? Where? Do you mean instead of going to school?"

"Well, no," replied my mother, "not exactly. I mean, you'd go to school in the country, and I'm sure you'd love it when spring comes. The thing is, Elaine, I've got the offer of a marvelous job; but it means travelling about and going abroad and I just can't take you with me."

"Well," I said, after thinking it over for a few minutes, "I think I'd rather stay here with Mrs. Moody. I'd be at school all day, and we'd be all right in the evenings. You'd be home for the holidays, wouldn't you?"

"But, darling," answered my mother rather impatiently, because she always liked everyone to agree with her plans at once, "you don't understand! We couldn't possibly afford to keep the flat and Mrs. Moody just for you. You'll simply love it in the country, and there is such a nice family who is willing to have you. They've got six children, and there is a girl called Janet who is only a few months younger than you."

"But if you give up the flat and Mrs. Moody," I said blankly, "where will my home be? I mean, I won't belong anywhere."

My mother gave a little shrug of annoyance, and I knew she thought I was being naughty and difficult, but I couldn't help it. I didn't particularly mind Mummy going, for I never saw her much in any case.

But Mrs. Moody and the flat were a different matter. I would be like a stray cat and not belong anywhere. Besides, if I did go to the country and didn't like it, or if those six children turned out to be horrible, where would I come back to?

"Don't be silly, Elaine," pleaded my mother. "Of course when I come back we'll get a new home, and you'll always

belong to me. Do try to be sensible. I don't want to leave you, but it will be much better for you later on if I earn more instead of what this part-time job I've been doing pays. Besides, I've always wanted to go abroad, and this is a marvelous chance."

I sat staring into the red glow of the fire, my mouth closed in an obstinate line. Six children in the country sounded horrible to me; I didn't want to go at all.

My mother was quite annoyed by my silence. She started again in a coaxing voice.

"You've no idea how nice it will be," she urged. "And I've taken such trouble to find a really nice place for you. Mrs. Owen was at school with me and, although we lost touch, I liked her better than any other girl I knew. Then when your daddy was killed, she wrote to me. She saw the news of the plane crash in the paper, and she wanted to know all about you and asked if she could be of any help. Of course, you were only tiny then, but I wrote to her a little while ago and asked if she knew of a nice boarding school, and she answered by return mail, offering to have you in her home so that you could go to school with her daughter Janet. It was very, very good of her, Elaine, and you must try to be a sensible girl. France isn't far away, and I will come over and see you from time to time."

I just sat silent, but I could see her face by glancing in the mirror, and it was clear that she was worried and frowning.

"Elaine," she said suddenly, "I'm going to have a little party tomorrow night to say good-bye to a few friends. You can help

me get it ready, and then you can put on your best party dress and come to the beginning of it. Won't that be fun?"

I looked up quickly. "Tomorrow? Already?" I cried. "Then when are we going?"

"Well," said my mother hesitatingly, "there'll be such a lot to do packing up the flat, I thought you'd better go fairly soon. I told Mrs. Owen you'd go on Friday."

Friday! I thought to myself. *Today is Tuesday—just three more days!* I suddenly felt terribly lonely, but I wasn't allowed to say no, and it didn't seem much good making a fuss when it was all settled. Nor did there seem to be anything else to talk about, so I escaped as soon as I could and crept away to bed.

The next day was busy, and I almost forgot my fears in the preparations for the party. The guests were coming at 8:30, and by half-past seven I was all ready in my best dress with my hair carefully curled. I had never been to a grown-up party before, and I wondered what we'd do.

I was disappointed on the whole, for although everyone made a fuss of me to begin with, they very soon forgot about me. There were no other children, and we didn't play games, although I think they were going to play cards later on. They sat about eating and smoking and making jokes I couldn't understand. I began to feel dizzy from the heat and smoke and rather sick from all the cakes I'd eaten. Mummy was busy pouring drinks, and I didn't think anyone would notice if I went away.

I slipped out and went into the kitchen. Mrs. Moody at

least had not forgotten me. She was sitting in an armchair mending my clothes. "Come along, Elaine," she said sharply. "It's time you were in bed. You're half asleep!"

I still felt sick and leaned up against her. "Come with me, Mrs. Moody," I whispered. "I feel sick!"

"I'm not surprised, such goings-on at your age," retorted Mrs. Moody, getting up at once. But she put her arm around me very gently and led me to my room and helped me get ready for bed. Then she fetched me a hot-water bottle because I was shivering.

"Mrs. Moody," I said suddenly, "I'm going to the country, and Mummy's going to France."

"So I understand," she replied stiffly.

"Mrs. Moody," I whispered, "have you ever lived in the country?"

A slow smile spread over Mrs. Moody's face. "I was brought up in Sussex," she said, "in a little cottage with a garden full of lavender and sweet peas and roses. To my mind, it's a better place than London for children."

I snuggled closer. It sounded like the nicest kind of story. In my imagination I could see Mrs. Moody as a little girl, thin and straight-backed and solemn, with her hair pulled back behind her ears.

"Go on," I whispered. "Tell me more."

She gave one of her rare little chuckles. "I can't remember much about it now, Elaine," she said, "except the swallows making nests under the thatch and the stream where we used

to play, all goldenlike, and the posies we used to pick. My granddad knew the names of all the wildflowers."

A burst of laughter exploded across the passage. I nestled closer to Mrs. Moody. We seemed shut in by ourselves in a world of happy memories.

"Mrs. Moody," I said pleadingly, "why don't you come with me?"

"Because I'm not invited, love," she answered, "and you're a big girl now. I've got another job as housekeeper, but I shall miss you, dearie, I really will."

"Tell me more about the country then," I said, and she chatted on about lambs and cows and fruit picking and orchards. I felt cool and well again, and I lay listening until I fell asleep.

2

The Welcome

The next day flew by, and my mother was kinder to me and took more notice of me than ever before. She spent a lot of time with me and took me out shopping, and in the afternoon we had tea at a "posh" hotel and went to a pantomime. It was really exciting, and in the daytime I almost forgot about Mrs. Moody, who sat faithfully in the kitchen, sorting and marking and letting down my clothes. Only at night, when Mummy left me with a hurried kiss and went out for the evening, did Mrs. Moody become important.

It was not difficult those last nights to persuade her to come and sit by my bed in the dark and go on talking about the country. This was a good thing, for it was only after dark that I began to feel that the world was really a very unsafe place and that in a very short time I would really belong to nobody. I would be shut up with six children whether I liked them or not, and whether they liked me or not, and down at

the bottom of my heart I knew that the children at school did not like me much, and I sometimes wondered why. No one had ever told me that I was spoiled and vain and cared for no one but myself—except Mrs. Moody when she was cross, and I had never taken any notice of her.

However, Mrs. Moody said that the countryside was such a lovely place to be, I felt a bit comforted by the thought of it. I had only been to the seaside in August for my holidays, and I had imagined that I was going to be taken away to a bright world of flowers, where the sun shone every day. This was a nice idea, for the snow had melted in the London streets, and the pavements were thick with brown slush and the air was heavy with fog.

Mrs. Moody remembered more and more as the week passed. She told me about harvests and hay fields and sheep-dipping, and I would lie listening, clinging to her hand and feeling comforted. When at last the dreaded morning came and the taxi stood at the door to take me to Euston station, I realized with dismay that it was far worse saying goodbye to Mrs. Moody than to Mummy. When we turned the corner and I lost sight of her thin figure waving on the doorstep, I felt that I had suddenly been cut off from everything that made life safe, and I burst into tears.

My mother, who was in the taxi with me, was upset by my sobbing and begged me to be good and sensible; so, as usual, I dried my tears and kept my fears to myself. At Euston we went to the book stall and bought some of my favorite comics and

two big boxes of chocolates, one for me to eat in the train and one for the Owen children. This cheered me up, and when the whistle blew and the train steamed off, I was able to wave quite cheerfully. In fact, I was impatient to be off so that I could settle down to enjoy the journey—and the chocolates!

Mummy had asked a lady to keep an eye on me, but I was not a friendly sort of child and, since I took no notice of her, she soon gave up trying to take notice of me. I read my comics and munched my sandwiches and chocolates, and now and then I went and stood in the corridor and looked out of the window. What I saw filled me with dismay, for this country was nothing like Mrs. Moody's country. It was miles of wet, yellow fields and bare black hedges and trees, with the distances blotted out by mist. It looked cold and muddy and lonely and miserable, and I soon got tired of it. I curled up in my corner and went fast asleep.

If it hadn't been for the lady looking after me, I would have slept right through the stop where I was supposed to get out. She woke me just in time, and I tumbled out with my big case and stood waiting on the platform, still half asleep and very bewildered and cold. The train roared away immediately, and the first thing I noticed was the quietness—no traffic or footsteps, only the muffled sound of the sea on the other side of the station and the soft rattle of waves breaking on pebbles, and when I sniffed I found that the air smelled salty and clean.

Just as I realized that the sea was only a few yards away, I looked up and saw a woman hurrying toward me as fast as

the three little children clinging to her hands and coat would allow, and one was only a toddler. They had been waiting for me at the far end of the long platform, and I supposed they were the Owens. I did not go forward to meet them, but stood quite still by my case.

"How do you do, Mrs. Owen," I remarked stiffly, trying to imitate my mother's voice when she greeted visitors she didn't like, and I held out my small, gloved hand.

Mrs. Owen hesitated, surprised, and there was just a second's silence as we stared at each other in the dim light of that January afternoon. Then a look came into her face that I did not understand—she might have been going to laugh or cry; in any case, she ignored my hand and kissed me very gently on both cheeks.

"How nice you've come, Elaine," she said. "We've all been so excited, and Peter and Janet were so cross they couldn't get home in time from school to meet you. But Johnny and Frances and Robin have come, and the others are waiting at home. Now come along—the taxi's just outside."

Johnny and Frances and Robin seemed as doubtful of me as I was of them and they had hidden behind their mother. I suppose they expected me to speak to them or kiss them, but I knew nothing about little children, and they were much younger than me anyway. In their woolly hats, overcoats, and strong country shoes, they all looked as wide as they were tall. When we reached the taxi, they all tumbled into the backseat and started whispering to one another under a blanket. I sat

in the front with Mrs. Owen and just answered yes and no to her questions, feeling very shy and lonely.

The landscape, once we'd left the town, was the gloomiest I'd ever seen in my life. It was a cold, drizzly evening, and the trees were blotted out. I could see nothing but wet roads, yellow fields, black hedges, and not a soul in sight. Whatever did people do here all day?

I stopped listening to Mrs. Owen and stared out of the window. The little ones kept peeping out from under the blanket like rabbits, and giggling and disappearing again. I think it was their way of trying to make friends, but I took no notice of them.

"There's our house," cried Johnny suddenly, poking me rather painfully in the back and pointing ahead, and I followed his finger, suddenly interested. We had been driving between trees, but now we were out in the open country again, and there on the hillside beamed the uncurtained windows of a house that stood on its own; the windows looked warm and friendly and welcoming. I glanced timidly at Mrs. Owen, and she smiled.

"Welcome to the vicarage, Elaine," she said. "Here we are, back home."

As the taxi pulled up at the gate, the front door was flung open, and two sturdy children and a big collie dog tumbled down the path making a great noise. I hated noisy, rough children and shrank back into my corner. But they didn't seem to notice, for they were prancing excitedly around their mother.

When at last I did climb out, the dog leaped up and put his front paws on my shoulders and tried to lick my face. The children shrieked with delight, for this was apparently what they had taught him to do, but I thought he was going to bite me, and I screamed with terror. Mrs. Owen rescued me in a moment and calmed the commotion.

"He's just greeting you, Elaine," explained Janet, "and he can shake hands too. Hold out your hand, and he'll hold out his paw. He's a very polite dog." But I thought he was a horrible dog and backed away, which surprised the children, for they could not imagine anyone being afraid of Cadwaller. I saw Janet and Peter glance at each other in amused surprise as we somehow all made our way up the garden path and in the front door. It was clear I had made a bad beginning.

"You are sleeping with me," said Janet kindly, making another attempt at a welcome. "I'll show you where and help you unpack." She led the way upstairs, and Peter came behind, carrying my case. She flung open the door of a little bedroom with two beds side by side.

I was not pleased, nor did I pretend to be. In London I had had a bedroom to myself with a fireplace, and a thick carpet on the floor, and my own little oak bookcase and armchair and toy box. This seemed to me a cold, shabby little room, and I did not notice all the tokens of welcome around that the children had prepared so carefully—the hyacinth on the chest of drawers, Frances's favorite teddy sitting on my bed, Peter's favorite picture stuck on the wall above my pillow, and

the little moss garden arranged in a tin lid on my chair.

Janet watched me eagerly, but I gave no sign of pleasure, and after a moment the expectant look died from her face. She shyly pointed out my bed and drawers and said she'd better go and help her mummy get supper. I felt she was glad to leave me, and I was glad to be left. I looked distastefully around at the rather shabby bedside mats and faded curtains and bedspreads, and then I noticed two sticky boiled sweets and a faded sprig of winter jasmine lying on my pillow. I flung them angrily into the wastepaper basket. Mummy and Mrs. Moody would never have allowed rubbish to be left on visitors' pillows, and I didn't see why Mrs. Owen should either. I opened my case and began hanging up my dresses in the closet that I was to share with Janet, and I was pleased to see that my clothes were much nicer than hers. I laid out my new nightie in full view on the bed; perhaps I could show her a thing or two, even if I was frightened of dogs.

But just as I was arranging the frills on my nightdress, Mrs. Owen came in and sat down with the youngest member of the family on her lap—a round bouncing baby of ten months with big blue eyes.

"This is baby Lucy," said Mrs. Owen, "and I hope you like babies, because I'm counting on your help. Six children is a lot, and you'll be my eldest girl. You are eleven, aren't you?"

"Yes," I answered, staring at baby Lucy. It had not occurred to me that I would be expected to help. At home Mrs. Moody did all the work, and I amused myself or watched television

or read books. I was not sure if I liked the idea or not; helping with a baby might be fun. In any case I could try, and if I didn't like it, I wouldn't do it, for I intended to be happy in my own way. And to me happiness meant having what I wanted and doing what I liked.

I followed Mrs. Owen down to supper, after watching her tuck baby Lucy in her cot, and was relieved to see that a large potato pie was carried in by a rosy-cheeked girl called Blodwen. I was afraid they had no maid, and that I might be expected to wash up or dust, which I would not have liked at all and had no intention of doing.

When the meal was ready, Mr. Owen appeared from his study. He was a tall, round-shouldered man with a tired face and kind blue eyes. He picked up Robin, who had flung his arms around his father's knees and nearly sent him flying, and greeted me very warmly. Then he said grace and we sat down to a noisy meal, for Janet and Peter had not seen him since breakfast and there was a lot of news to share. Johnny and Frances seemed to have done a great deal since dinnertime and were bursting with news.

"Dad," began Peter, who had only gone back to school that day, "I'm sitting next to Glyn Evans in class, and he said he'd swap me two rabbits for some stamps and a catapult—can I, Dad?"

"Daddy," broke in Janet, not waiting for a reply, "I might be in the under-twelve netball team; do you think we could put up a post in the garden so I could practice shooting?"

"Can I, Dad?" said Peter.

"Daddy, Daddy," squeaked Johnny, suddenly remembering and going rigid with excitement, "we stood on the bridge when the train went underneath, and all the smoke came up around us."

"Could I, Daddy?" persisted Janet.

"There were two baby lambs in the field; I heard them cry," said Frances in a whisper that reached her father's ears above all the noise. She smiled broadly at him, confident that her bit of news was perhaps the most exciting of all, and he smiled back at her.

"Can I, Dad?" said Peter again. He was a very persevering boy, as I discovered later.

"Could I, Daddy?" said Janet at the same moment. "Why, yes, I think so," answered Mr. Owen peacefully.

"There's an old post in the garage—Jan, we could fix it up with some wire. And I'll see if I can find a box and some netting for your rabbits, Pete."

"What about you, Elaine? Do you play netball?"

"I used to sometimes at school," I mumbled, wishing they would leave me alone. I felt terribly shy with all these happy, confident children, and I wished Janet wasn't so keen about netball. I'd never liked games much. I'd sat at home on the holidays or gone to shops with my mother, and I'd never learned to run about and jump and play.

I didn't like the potato pie either; it was too thick, and I wanted to go home. My eyes filled with tears that might have

fallen, but I suddenly realized that Frances was looking at me in a secret kind of way, her homely little face alight with excitement.

"Did you see them?" she suddenly whispered across the table while Peter and Janet had a loud discussion about what kinds of rabbits they wanted.

"What?" I whispered back shyly.

"Them—my surprise," she answered softly, her eyes shining. "What I put on your pillow—did you see?"

I suddenly remembered the sticky sweets and the withered twig. I had thought them rubbish, but now they suddenly seemed precious. They showed that one, at least, of this rowdy gang had cared about my coming.

"Yes, I did," I answered. "I did. Thank you, Frances."

Then it suddenly became quiet, and I noticed that Johnny had laid a Bible in front of Mr. Owen. He was about to read, and a strange sort of calm seemed to settle over those restless, eager children. I had always thought the Bible was a very dull Book, but tonight everyone appeared to be listening, even little Frances.

I did not attempt to listen, for I was certain I couldn't understand it if I tried. It was something about a vine and some branches, but only the last verse caught my attention.

"These things I have spoken to you . . . that your joy may be full."

I thought about these words, for I liked the sound of them. Then everyone shut their eyes and bowed their heads to pray,

and this I understood, for Mrs. Moody sometimes made me say the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father in heaven." But in a moment I realized that this was different, for Mr. Owen seemed to be speaking to Someone who was really there, and we all seemed to be in a place of safety—Mummy far away in London, the children around the table, the babies asleep upstairs—we were all brought near to Someone who cared for us.

An hour later, when Mrs. Owen had kissed us good night and Janet had fallen asleep beside me, I lay awake, staring out of the window at the starry sky that looked so wide without any roofs and spires massed against it. I felt quite bewildered by all that had happened, and it seemed ages since the taxi had turned the corner, hiding Mrs. Moody from view. Once again my eyes filled with tears of loneliness, and I wanted to go home—and yet there were those strange words that seemed to comfort me a little: "These things I have spoken to you . . . that your joy may be full."*

What things? I wondered. I wished I'd listened.

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* John 15:11

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