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## In Now

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# In Now

A beginning.

Ella dreams of a house on a hill. It will be two stories tall—that is decided from the start—with a garden in the back of blueberry bushes and tomato plants and a small attic up top that contains no ghosts or spooky shadows or scares (the spiders could remain, if they must).

On rainy days she talks about the house with her mother over mugs of hot tea on the rug in the living room, and on sunny days she talks about the house over cups of cool lemonade in the shade of the oak tree out front.

“Should the shutters be white or blue?” she asks.

“How dark is the blue?” her mother responds.

Ella considers for a moment. “Not dark at all. Paler than the sky.”

“And those flower boxes you’re going to plant, you wanted pink pansies, yes?”

“Yes,” Ella replies.

“Well, in that case, if the pansies are pink, and the blue paler than the sky, then I think the shutters should be blue.”

And so the shutters are to be blue, and they paint themselves in Ella’s mind, one more piece of the dream constructed. A blue paler than the sky. The rest of the house will be white, but not too white—a house that sparkles too brightly would be cold and uninviting, for no inhabited house looks completely pristine. The paint begins to chip the moment the first foot steps over the threshold. The headboard of the first bed brought through the doorway hits the frame and knocks a piece of painted wood free, and the house becomes a home. So the house is not to be too white, but yellowed by the sun, cracked in some places, and worn away so thin in others that the weathered wood shows through. And the shutters will be blue.

Then what? A beginning, and then Ella, the girl, contemplates the house, the dream, with her mother. Two characters in a place, places, in a time, or many times, or sometime. They dream up a wooden picket fence and a rusty weather vane and seashells strung into a wind chime on the porch. The house completes, the warm breezes blow, the tea mugs drain and what happens next? Tragedy, drama, suspense—that’s how a story goes, is it not? The beginning leads to a middle and the middle needs something, something new, something bad, or at least uncomfortable, or at least—something.

“It’s alright, baby, it’s alright,” her mother says, maybe, as a small Ella sits up shivering and feverish night after night, worse each time. “Just think about your house, think about that, how beautiful the mornings will be at the breakfast table, overlooking the meadow with the little baby ducklings and geese. You remember how we said it was going to look? Do you remember, baby?”

Or maybe not.

Maybe a healthy Ella sits up at her window one rainy summer night, waiting patiently for the sight of her mother’s headlights pulling into the driveway, but they never come because her mother’s car is crumpled on the interstate between a tractor trailer and a guardrail.

Or maybe not.

“Mom?” Ella might whisper over her honey-sweetened tea. “Why can’t we stay in one house? Why do we need to keep moving away?” And her mother might respond, “Because, baby, because.” And *because* might mean that no one can find them, especially not the ones who are looking, especially the ones who are bad, and they both know this because they have said it a million times: *because because because*.

Or they don’t. They don’t say any of these things but instead say hundreds of other things, live hundreds of other lives, all winding up in some tragedy because that is what has to happen to little girls who dream up beautiful houses with their mothers. There’s a fire, or a flood, or the world itself comes to an end and there’s just nothing anymore, and Ella and her mother no longer speak or are not allowed to speak or just disappear entirely.

Is this how it goes?

Is Ella now doomed to live a life of misery, the memory of a childhood dream home, the only sweet thing left to her in a world that is steadily crumbling around her? Is this the middle, leading to an end? Is the end even worth it after all of this? After any of this?

Just for once, maybe the story does not have to be sad. Maybe the world stays the same. Maybe the little dreaming girl does not get sick, maybe the mother does not get into an accident, maybe one woman never passes prematurely before the other, visions of pink pansies lulling her gently away. Maybe they are not running, not hiding, with no malicious figure tracking

them down to cause them harm. Maybe there are no fires, no floods. They do not go to bed in pain or in fear, hungry or cold. They are unfamiliar with the feeling brought by loss, by death. Maybe they want for nothing.

Maybe every night Ella's mother tucks her in with a kiss, and Ella is free to wish for more wonderful things in her life like puppies or new dresses or birthday cake for breakfast until her eyes flutter peacefully to rest. The house is just a fun activity for mother and daughter to dream up together in their lazy daytime hours, not an escape from an impossible present, and after time Ella grows older and they discuss the house a little less and a little less. Ella excels in school and matures into a beautiful young woman who still sits on occasion with her mother under the oak tree, now with longer limbs and a thinner face. They do not always talk about the house—now the conversation turns to Ella's future, Ella's plans. The real ones. No more debates on colors or designs, no more description of how the paint chips in the afternoon sunlight. Ella moves away, becomes a doctor or a teacher or a business entrepreneur, and she buys a house that has white shutters and yellow siding because she has, in truth, forgotten about the blue. Or maybe she does not forget, and finds the house on the hill, or she builds it herself, and it's everything she imagined, except for the creak in the stairs and some dust that will not stop collecting on the countertops. What if Ella is happy, and her mother is happy, and they live happily ever after in the realest way it can be lived? With minor bumps and minor trials and an end that is not perfect but is good enough. Is the story now worse? Are there enough bruises along the way? Do we still care about the little girl, worry, wonder, reach to hold her hand? Is this not what we all want in the end?

Or what if, just maybe:

There is no future for Ella because it does not matter. It's not written here in final, black ink, so it does not exist. Ella herself did not exist before the house on the hill, and she will not exist after, not that we know of. What exists of her is what is here and now, what she dreamed, will dream, dreams. There is nothing more than a girl with lemonade constructing a real-life fantasy in her mind, building board by board the most beautiful house that will have flower boxes, and an oak tree of its own, and white walls, and everything, everything wonderful in the whole wide world. Pink pansies. Blue shutters. Blue paler than the sky.

And an end.