

THE REPLACEMENT

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Seventy years later . . .

Erin stepped out of the car onto the gravel driveway of their new home. It had seemed like only yesterday when her mother told her about the move.

She had been looking for her favorite striped sweater, annoyed as she tossed another stuffed animal to the side. This one was a giraffe. His name was Mr. Fuzzy Hooves and he was the bane of Erin's existence. Him, Mrs. Snow Whiskers, Mr. Purple Tooth, Lady Daisy, and Ned. They were always mixed among Erin's things like little animal invaders.

But that's what happened when you shared a room with your five-year-old sister: There were no sides. There were just Becca's toys, and they were always everywhere.

“Mom!” Erin had hollered. “I can’t find my striped sweater!”

There was no answer. Her mother didn’t believe in yelling, at least, not unless it was for emergencies. So, with yet another groan, Erin stomped from her bedroom, down the narrow hall of their small apartment to the living room, where her mother sat on the couch, folding laundry.

“Mom, I can’t find my striped sweater,” Erin repeated.

Her mother didn’t even look up from folding a pair of pants. “It’s in the wash.”

“But why? It wasn’t even dirty!”

“Becca spilled cranberry juice on it.”

Erin fought back the urge to yell. Her mother would only scold her and say the same thing she said every time Becca ruined one of Erin’s things: “Remember, all things can be replaced.”

Erin always hated hearing that. Probably because it was rare that her parents actually replaced anything of Erin’s that Becca ruined.

“But I wanted to wear it to the park with Sarah this afternoon.”

Her mother gave her a sympathetic look, but that didn’t

magically make the sweater clean again. “Sorry, honey. Wear your purple sweater.”

“Never mind,” Erin grumbled, as she started to turn back down the hall. “I’ll just hang out in my room.”

“Erin? Come back, I want to tell you something.”

Immediately, Erin sensed the tone change in her mother’s voice. It was her “serious” voice, and it usually came with bad news. Like when Erin had to get her tonsils taken out, or when she couldn’t go to a Chicago Cubs game with her friend Sarah because her parents needed her to stay home and watch Becca while they went to her father’s company dinner.

With a feeling of dread, Erin came back into the living room. Her mother patted the spot on the couch beside her and Erin sat.

“Yeah?” Erin asked, not wanting to know what her mother had to say.

“We were going to tell the both of you at dinner, but I realized that it’s not always fair that we treat you and Becca the same. You’re older than her, of course, so you might react differently to things, and we should devote just as much attention to your feelings—”

“Mom,” Erin interrupted, feeling more anxious by the second. “Just tell me.”

“Your father got a new job.”

Erin blinked. That was usually good news, right? So why was her mother using her “serious” voice?

“His position will be much different than before. He’ll be able to work from home. That means he’ll need an office.”

Erin wasn’t entirely sure where this was going. Her mother already had an office—and she needed one for her work. Laura Dodgeson was an accomplished therapist and wrote an ongoing book series on child therapy.

“What I’m trying to say, honey, is that we no longer need to live in the city. We found a house outside Chicago that is just lovely. It’s in a town called Pemblebrook. I know it will be a change, but it will be a good one. You can have your own room, and . . .”

Erin hardly heard anything after that. Though moving might’ve been bad news to most twelve-year-olds, Erin was actually *thrilled*. Sure, it was going to be sad leaving Sarah, but Erin didn’t have many other friends—partly because she had to take care of Becca so much that she missed hanging out with her classmates after school. And it wasn’t exactly that she *hated*

Chicago, but ever since last summer when they'd visited Aunt Katharine in the countryside of Illinois, Erin couldn't wait to go back.

Every day there had been something different to do. She'd watched the minnows swim over the shiny pebbles in the creek behind her aunt's house. They'd flown kites over small hills covered in clovers and taken long nature paths through the woods.

It had been so free and fun outside the confinement of the city's concrete borders.

Living out in a small town, in their own house, with their own backyard, and—most importantly—her own room, was basically a dream come true.

And now, standing there in front of the house, Erin had to admit that the photos from the real estate agent's website hadn't done it justice. It seemed taller than the pictures, reaching up to almost brush the blue June sky. Small sparrows flitted across the roof, and then perched on the rain gutters, chirping a chorus of broken songs. It was a two-story house, and had pale blue-gray siding, a white wraparound porch, and a redbrick chimney. In the early afternoon, the sunlight glinted off the windows and

cast shadows from the few trees that surrounded their property. They were the last house at the end of a long lane with loads of space between each home.

While driving out of Chicago on their way to Pemblebrook, Erin hadn't once looked back at the towering skyscrapers made of steel and glass. She was too busy looking toward the rolling green hills of summertime Illinois. So naturally she hadn't slept a wink throughout the car trip, even though it had been over three hours long.

The Dodgesons had drunk in the sights of their new town. Pemblebrook seemed to have everything: Sprawling parks with soccer fields and tennis courts, charming streets with local shops and restaurants, a public library, a movie theater, a skating rink—it was the perfect place. Halfway through the town, her parents pointed out what would be Erin's new school in the fall, and Erin actually found herself excited—even about something as boring as school.

“Erin! Erin! Look! Look!” Becca cried, pulling Erin's attention away from the house to the backyard—literally. Her little sister yanked on Erin's arm so hard it bordered on painful, not to mention annoying.

It wasn't hard to see what had Becca all riled up. In the center of their very large backyard was a very large oak tree. It had big sprawling branches that dipped low to the earth, almost like they were knobby elbows looking for a rest. The trunk stretched up ten, maybe twelve feet, before it divided off into the large, thick branches. And while the big oak tree was beautiful in of itself, it was not the most exciting thing in the backyard.

Wedged in the center of the oak tree, between two massive branches, was a little house made of sanded yellowwood planks. It was about the size for a child Erin's age, complete with a window and checkered curtains. More wooden planks had been nailed into the trunk as a makeshift ladder that traveled up to what Erin assumed had to be the door into the treehouse.

"Wow," Erin breathed.

"Yeah, wow," Becca repeated.

The two girls raced across the backyard to the tree, their footsteps flattening the soft green grass.

"Me first! Me first!" Becca grabbed hold of the first wooden plank and started her journey up. Erin wasn't going to argue; she knew she needed to stay below her sister in case Becca accidentally slipped and fell.

But, about four planks up, Becca froze.

“Erin?” she said in a small voice. “I changed my mind. Can I get back down?”

“Sure,” Erin said, confused. “Just step back down, I’ve got you.”

As Becca started her descent, Erin placed a hand on her back for safety. Strangely, her sister’s back wasn’t warm through her clothes. It was chilly. Like touching a cold stone.

Once she’d returned to solid ground, Becca folded her arms. She was uncommonly quiet.

“Becks? What’s wrong?” Erin asked.

Before Becca could answer, their mother’s voice carried across the lawn. “Erin? Becca? Don’t you want to see inside?”

“Coming!” Becca shouted as she turned right around and sprinted toward the house.

Erin hesitated. Becca’s retreat from the treehouse had certainly been strange—Erin had never known her younger sister to back down from anything. Even high jungle gyms on the playground. And though she badly wanted to go up into the treehouse, she more desperately wanted to see her new room. So, with only a small ounce of reluctance, she hurried to the back door, where her mother stood waiting.