

DREAM CATCHING

by

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"That's where Mrs. Martin lived. Number 12, on the right."

I nod my head in the direction of one of the identical, semi-detached white stucco houses, but keep my hands on the wheel of the black Nissan sports car, avoiding the cars parked either side of the narrow street never built to accommodate them.

"She was one of my mother's best friends. I used to run and hide in her garden at bedtime."

My sons, Tim, fifteen, beside me, and Jeremy, twelve, in the back, say nothing. I turn the car into the horseshoe section of Austin Road. I haven't chosen to bring them here in this particular car. It is a mode of transport that takes us from A to B. When the car rental firm failed to produce the family sedan I ordered, they called it an upgrade. My boys love it. They call it a 200SX. Sleek and low, it's not the best vehicle for sightseeing.

"That's the Green. It didn't used to have all those parking spaces on it. We played cricket, marbles, and Lamp-to-Lamp, between that street light at the bottom and the one at the top."

I wonder if the children of Austin Road invented the complicated rules of Lamp-to-Lamp, so suited to our turf, on the council built and owned housing estate, in Cirencester, our small west of England town.

It begins just as the lavender streetlight flickers on in the long dusk, just as the rising dew brings out the scent of freshly mown lawns, as the evening thickens too much

for ball games or fantasy palaces. Dads stop digging vegetable patches. Mums end chats over garden gates. We never play the game in daylight.

Drawn like moths to the pool of light, at the bottom of the Green, Geraldine Sollis, Robert Osborne, Johnny and Bridget Martin, a selection of the large Herrington and Woodham families, we wonder how to stretch the early summer evening and avoid going home.

"Let's play Lamp-to-Lamp."

Robert Bushell, ten years old, likes to be the first Chaser. Ruthie Woodham elects herself Chooser and picks the category; fruit. A torrent of whispered haggling ensues. I want to be strawberry or banana, as always. The Chooser's decision is final, but Ruthie is kind to us little ones. She turns and, across the divide of the street, faces the Chaser.

"We got Lemon, Orange, Raspberry, Strawberry, Apple and Banana. What else?"

We prompt her.

Robert Bushell's West Country accent drawls through the gloom.

"Strawberry." He has an uncanny knack of picking me.

"Giv'er a start," orders Ruthie.

Banana, Orange and Raspberry concur.

"Yeah. Giv'er a start."

Robert concedes. The chase will begin when I reach the telegraph pole.

Sacrificial bait, I set off, up the concrete-slabbed path towards the lamp, so distant at the top of the street. Huffing on my short chubby legs, like an injured piglet, I try to outrun a cheetah.

The other Fruits, still under the lamp at the bottom cheer and encourage until the moment, beside Mrs. Griffith's garden, when he draws near and pounces.

My capture sends Robert back to choose another runner, this time, one who evades him long enough to pound the second lamp post and yell, "Lamp-to-Lamp." The remaining Fruits storm up the Green. Those who reach the lamp play all over again, with

a new category, flowers. Those caught join the Chaser to hunt their former fellow prey. We repeat the formula until, one by one, mothers call us in, and we slouch home.

Built in response to the post-World War II housing shortage, by the local authority, in response to the post-World War II housing shortage, the Beeches Estate houses many families not normally in need of public assistance. Our fellow residents are not just locals, but people from all over, displaced by war. My parents have come south, from Yorkshire. The Potters and the Herringtons come from badly bombed Liverpool. The McMahons hail from Ireland; the Sharps from Wales, and Polly Wales, who married a British serviceman, from Malta.

Sure, there are families my mother called scruffy. There are front gardens where old prams or bedsprings rust in the soft rain, where weeds grow unheeded, flowers and vegetables unknown. But, for the most part, herbaceous borders blossom around neat, well-maintained lawns. Every few years, men from the local council arrive and paint the exterior window frames and the doors. At first, we all share the same green doors, but, in the sixties, the painters arrive with a new color scheme. Front doors turned red, yellow and blue. We have no choice, but we don't mind. Gardens allow plenty of room for self-expression and everyone's house exterior is equally maintained.

The black 200SX glints and glides down the hill. The white concrete plaster of the three bedroom, one bathroom houses has turned a tired grey. A number of the houses are now privately owned, but a shabbiness hovers about the street that was never there in the fifties, back when only three families in the street owned cars, two had telephones, and four or five had televisions. I name more former neighbors' houses. At the bottom, in front of the red brick block of flats, I ease the car round two curves, past the lamp.

"That's my house. Number 54.

The one where four or five men, in their late twenties and early thirties, are building a wall. Their sleeveless t-shirts display well-used muscles and their skin, tanned for Englishmen, indicate their regular jobs are similar to this Saturday morning pastime, in the outdoors.

They straighten their backs and stare at me.

A familiar response twitches in my stomach. The same kind of double flip it used to carry out when I encountered groups of boys from other parts of the estate, who threw stones at me, because I went to the Catholic convent, not the state school like them, or just because I was a girl and there to be teased. I don't expect them to toss stones at me, but I lose the courage to stop and tell them, "I was the first person born in this house. This is my home."

The first occupants of Number 54, my parents move in 1952.

My father decorates the interior walls with bold wallpapers and paints. He covers one in black paper, patterned with pink and green tulips. The bathroom is painted pink on the lower half of the wall and ivory on the top. The living room sports one red wall, to compliment three grey ones, dotted with red medallions. The identical homes of my friends in the street bear bland beige, nondescript patterns.

To my mother, it's a palace. Since her marriage to my father, she has lived in a tiny house on the other side of town, which lacks indoor toilets. Brought up in the smart part of Dewsbury, Yorkshire, it has been a tough 13 years for my mother, raising two daughters.

My mother has been warned having another child could endanger her life, and she had lost two previous babies close to birth yet, she delivers me, in my parents' bedroom, the following year.

I think it is normal to huddle round coal fires in winter, too hot on your face but cold on your back; to find ice the inside of the bathroom windows, an ice sculpture in the

sink. I understand that not everybody hides from the butcher boy, who delivers the meat, because they don't have enough money to pay him, but I don't feel deprived. I have enough toys to fill one cardboard box, including a clockwork train set, building bricks, two rubber gnomes and several jigsaw puzzles. I have my doll, Sylvia, who can walk, when I hold her hands, and say "Mama" when I tip her in a certain direction. She endures having her two, and only, teeth removed, when I lose mine, and having her finger and toenails painted with my sister's nail varnish. She's very stiff and not comfortable to sleep with, so the blue knitted teddy I win in a raffle does that. And I have books, which even if I read them all, I can read again.

Disappointment floods through me. Because I am afraid of men I don't know, who seem familiar with my house, I can't show my sons home. They won't see my father turn the kitchen table upside down for me to sail around the floor; my sister Pat and my mother knitting in unison beside the burning fire; the look of delight on my sister Christine's face, when she hears the opening bars of "My Fair Lady" and knows the record is for her. They won't see her pink and white polka dot sundress with the huge skirt, supported by net petticoats, and the matching bolero.

When we aren't playing Lamp-to-Lamp, we are princesses called Snowdrop or Bluebell. We are pioneers settling the American West, just as they do on the Saturday morning pictures, at the Gaumont Theater, we watch for sixpence. We build dens of branches and grass on the slopes beside the railway track that runs behind several of our homes. We put on our own carnival parade, singing, "She wears red feathers and a hoolie hoolie skirt." We plan to be movie stars or tycoons, to arrive home, one day, in a swanky car, to the envy of everyone else.

Here I am, coming home in the golden coach of a low-slung black sports car, but I don't know the whereabouts of a single kid who played that game forty summers ago. None of the people supposed to drop their jaws and gape are here.

The envy I see in eyes assessing my 200SX, is not accompanied by love and admiration for me, but a covetousness that begrudges another's possessions. Maybe I put it there and all I really see is a green desire to drive a little black sports car. Perhaps I should stop the 200SX and describe my claim to the house.

Maybe they will welcome me, pleased to know dreams can come true.

I keep the sports car moving.

"They've chopped down my mother's lilac tree and put concrete over the lawn."

Suddenly, I don't want to know if the big red peonies and the purple Michaelmas daisies have gone the same way. I don't want to know if the red rose bush my father gave my mother to help mend the pain of a quarrel has been dug up to make way for some concrete patio.

Nor do I want to remember what my sons can't, because they were too young.

The curtains are closed in most rooms for some reason known only to my mother, despite the daylight. The lovely oval table in the sitting room is covered in dust and hundreds of fifty pence pieces, so my mother knows where they are when the gas meter needs feeding. Dried up food spills stain the carpets. The place smells so stale, I have difficulty breathing without gagging. My mother drifts from day to day, believing her own life has lost its purpose.

This house isn't home. Like a photograph left out in the sun, the picture of Number 54 Austin Road as home begins to fade the day my father dies here, unexpectedly, when I am 21. The day I come home from college, unexpectedly, to find a heart attack has claimed him.

My dream now is different. What I really want to do is creep in the door, tiptoe through the kitchen and see my father sitting after lunch in the dining room, my mother's back to me. I long to see him grin, as I put my finger to my lips, unseen by my mother, until I place my hands on her eyes and cry, "Surprise!"

Dreams like memories are ephemeral. Only the present is solid. I can't imprint my past on my sons any more than bring my parents back from their graves. Showing them my home, my playground, won't explain to them who I am. They already know who I am.

I am not a little girl who plays Lamp-to-Lamp across the Green, who waves at trains that run past the bottom of the garden, who creeps down the stairs at the smell of something cooking after my bed time.

I am their mother.

One day, I will be their memories.

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