Hometown

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Abstract

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"JUST relax," Pres said. "You don't have a thing to be jumpy about. Mother's just a plain motherly woman and I know you two will get along fine. She has some little quirks, but I think you're capable of recognizing them."

The several town loafers looked a little harder as the car idled past them to come to a stop. A dog barked curiously. Some school kids bounced into the drugstore with its crepe-paper and Coty's face powder window displays. Then the sleepy stoplight blinked its green eye and they were on the other side of town and almost there. She couldn't help thinking of her own hometown. Modernity personified, young and unconventional. Wealthy oil men on the chamber of commerce. Her dad one of the biggest play-boys and her mother, glamorous. It all made her a stranger here.

Luke let them out—"Well, Preston, it's mighty fine seein' you again, mighty fine"—deposited their baggage on the grass, and eagerly exacted the fare from Pres. Bev turned and looked at the stately house. Its cupolas, elaborated with the stale gingerbread of a past age, remained aloof. She smiled. But there was no friendly flutter—not even a curtain through a window. Settled, box-like in structure and feeling-tone. Rain, wind and cares and oddities of generations had slid off a steep roof with equal disconcern.

The wooden walk, as they passed over it, squeaked. A frightened bird rushed into a shabby nest in the tree that dominated the yard. Approaching the porch she told him quickly, "I'm a little uneasy, Pres."

He cradled her hand in his—"Why you know that's just nonsense. You must be tired from the trip. This isn't something you'd be jumpy about."

"I guess I'll be all right in a minute. Maybe I'm hungry." Her fashion-proper shoulders drooped a bit as she felt him watching her, thinking about her. Gay and witty, light-hearted and flowerlike—that's what she was—or had been.
The front door opened quickly and there was a big circle of mother and son. The woman detached herself from the man almost self-consciously. It took only a few moments for Pres. . . .

“Well, Mother, this is Bev. You two will have a great time together. I'll take your bags to the room, Bev. Mother, show her around, will you? Now, if you ladies will excuse me, I've got to see an important pooch.”

It hadn't taken long. Now she was standing alone facing this plain woman in the red print dress. Her face, pink-lined, was surrounded by a silver-grey doughnut of hair. The mouth was a soft outline of kindness.

“Preston just can't wait to see his old dog. I guess he told you where your room would be. I hope you don’t mind sharing it with me. We're kinda pressed for room since pa died and we took in roomers. But we're glad to have you here.”

“Thank you. I've heard a lot about you and it's nice to be in a home again.” The older woman showed her to the room, then excused herself to “fix a bite to eat.” Well, now what? She put her hat and gloves on the circus-pink bedspread. The smoky mirror looked back at her. It was an unfamiliar self. The sparkly stuff, subdued. No bubbling. Thoughts pulled down to earth. Quiet. The woman had been plain enough, perhaps too plain, but there was something there to influence others that was devoid of the shininess, the tinsel stuff. Pres was downstairs romping with the dog. She could hear him and wanted suddenly to be with him. She closed the door behind her silently, then properly started down the stairs.

Walking was no longer in the sparkly modern clouds but on brown carpets worn a little thin in the middle. This mood tone lapping her soul was like that. Durable but unfamiliar . . . homy brown to her. The strangeness kept going away more as she stepped on each step down to the bottom.

When she talked her eyebrows shot up above the rims of her glasses as though they were suspicious of the silly things and wanted to see for themselves.

Jean Larson