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No Place Like Home

Mary Higgins Clark

Prologue

Ten-year-old Liza was dreaming her favorite dream, the one about the day when she was six years old, and she and Daddy were at the beach, in New Jersey, at Spring Lake. They'd been in the water, holding hands and jumping together whenever a wave broke near them. Then a much bigger wave suddenly rushed in and began to break right over them, and Daddy grabbed her. "Hang on, Liza," he yelled, and the next minute they were tumbling under water and being thrown around by the wave. Liza had been so scared.

She could still feel her forehead slamming into the sand when the wave crashed them onto the shore. She had swallowed water and was coughing and her eyes were stinging and she was crying but then Daddy pulled her onto his lap. "Now that was a wave!" he said, as he brushed the sand from her face, "but we rode it out together, didn't we, Liza?"

That was the best part of the dream—having Daddy's arms around her and feeling so safe.

Before the next summer came around, Daddy had died. After that she'd never really felt safe again. Now she was always afraid, because Mom had made Ted, her stepfather, move out of the house. Ted didn't want a divorce, and he kept pestering Mom, wanting her to let him come back. Liza knew she wasn't the only one afraid; Mom was afraid, too.

Liza tried not to listen. She wanted to go back into the dream of being in Daddy's arms, but the voices kept waking her up.

Someone was crying and yelling. Did she hear Mom calling Daddy's name? What was she saying? Liza sat up and slid out of bed.

Mom always left the door to Liza's bedroom open just a little so that she could see the light in the hall. And until she married Ted last year, she had always told Liza

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that if she woke up and felt sad, she could come into her room and sleep with her. Once Ted moved in, she'd never gotten in bed with her mother again.

It was Ted's voice she heard now. He was yelling at Mom, and Mom was screaming. "Let go of me!"

Liza knew that Mom was so afraid of Ted, and that since he'd moved out she even kept Daddy's gun in the drawer of her night table. Liza rushed down the hall, her feet moving noiselessly along the padded carpet. The door of Mom's sitting room was open and inside she could see that Ted had Mom pinned against the wall and was shaking her. Liza ran past the sitting room and went directly into her mother's bedroom. She hurried around the bed and yanked open the night table drawer. Trembling, she grabbed the gun and ran back to the sitting room.

Standing in the doorway, she pointed the gun at Ted and screamed, "Let go of my mother!"

Ted spun around, still holding on to Mom, his eyes wide and angry. The veins in his forehead were sticking out. Liza could see the tears streaming down her mother's cheeks.

"Sure," he yelled. With a violent thrust, he shoved Liza's mother at her. When she crashed into Liza, the gun went off. Then Liza heard a funny little gurgle and Mom crumpled to the floor. Liza looked down at her mother, then up at Ted. He began to lunge toward her, and Liza pointed the gun at him and pulled the trigger. She pulled it again and again, until he fell down and then began crawling across the room and tried to grab the gun from her. When it wouldn't fire anymore, she dropped the gun and got down on the floor and put her arms around her mother. There was no sound, and she knew her mother was dead.

After that Liza had only a hazy memory of what happened. She remembered Ted's voice on the phone, the police coming, someone pulling her arms from her mother's neck.

She was taken away, and she never saw her mother again.

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Twenty-four Years Later

I cannot believe I am standing in the exact spot where I was standing when I killed my mother. I ask myself if this is part of a nightmare, or if it is really happening. In the beginning, after that terrible night, I had nightmares all the time. I spent a good part of my childhood drawing pictures of them for Dr. Moran, a psychologist in California, where I went to live after the trial. This room figured in many of those drawings.

The mirror over the fireplace is the same one my father chose when he restored the house. It is part of the wall, recessed and framed. In it, I see my reflection. My face is

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deadly pale. My eyes no longer seem dark blue, but black, reflecting all the terrible visions that are leaping through my mind.

The color of my eyes is a heritage from my father. My mother's eyes were lighter, a sapphire blue, picture perfect with her golden hair. My hair would be dark blond if I left it natural. I have darkened it, though, ever since I came back to the East Coast sixteen years ago to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. I am also taller than my mother was by five inches. Yet, as I grow older, I believe I am beginning to resemble my mother in many ways, and I try to distance myself from that resemblance. I have always lived in dread of someone saying to me, "You look familiar..." At the time, my mother's image was splashed all over the media, and still turns up periodically in stories that rehash the circumstances of her death. So if anyone says I look familiar, I know it's her they have in mind. I, Celia Foster Nolan, formerly Liza Barton, the child the tabloids dubbed "Little Lizzie Borden," am far less likely to be recognized as that chubby-faced little girl with golden curls who was acquitted—not exonerated—of deliberately killing her mother and trying to kill her stepfather.

My second husband, Alex Nolan, and I have been married for six months. Today I thought we were going to take my four-year-old son, Jack, to see a horse show in Peapack, an upscale town in northern New Jersey, when suddenly Alex detoured to Mendham, a neighboring town. It was only then that he told me he had a wonderful surprise for my birthday and drove down the road to this house. Alex parked the car, and we went inside.

Jack is tugging at my hand, but I remain frozen to the spot. Energetic, as most four-year-olds are, he wants to explore. I let him go, and in a flash he is out of the room and running down the hall.

Alex is standing a little behind me. Without looking at him, I can feel his anxiety. He believes he has found a beautiful home for us to live in, and his generosity is such that the deed is solely in my name, his birthday gift to me. "I'll catch up with Jack, honey," he reassures me. "You look around and start figuring how you'll decorate."

As he leaves the room, I hear him call, "Don't go downstairs, Jack. We haven't finished showing Mommy her new house."

"Your husband tells me that you're an interior designer," Henry Paley, the real estate agent, is saying. "This house has been very well kept up, but, of course, every woman, especially one in your profession, wants to put her own signature on her home."

Not yet trusting myself to speak, I look at him. Paley is a small man of about sixty, with thinning gray hair, and neatly dressed in a dark blue pin-striped suit. I realize he is waiting expectantly for me to show enthusiasm for the wonderful birthday gift my husband has just presented to me.

"As your husband may have told you, I was not the selling agent," Paley explains. "My boss, Georgette Grove, was showing your husband various properties nearby

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when he spotted the for sale sign on the lawn. He apparently fell in love with it immediately. The house is quite simply an architectural treasure, and it's situated on ten acres in the premier location in a premier town."

I know it is a treasure. My father was the architect who restored a crumbling eighteenth-century mansion, turning it into this charming and spacious home. I look past Paley and study the fireplace. Mother and Daddy found the mantel in France, in a château about to be demolished. Daddy told me the meanings of all the sculptured work on it, the cherubs and the pineapples and the grapes...

Ted pinning Mother against the wall...

Mother sobbing...

I am pointing the gun at him. Daddy's gun...

Let go of my mother...

Sure...

Ted spinning Mother around and shoving her at me...

Mother's terrified eyes looking at me...

The gun going off...

Lizzie Borden had an axe...

"Are you all right, Mrs. Nolan?" Henry Paley is asking me.

"Yes, of course," I manage, with some effort. My tongue feels too heavy to mouth the words. My mind is racing with the thought that

I should not have let Larry, my first husband, make me swear that I wouldn't tell the truth about myself to anyone, not even to someone I married. In this moment I am fiercely angry at Larry for wringing that promise from me. He had been so kind when I told him about myself before our marriage, but in the end he failed me. He was ashamed of my past, afraid of the impact it might have on our son's future. That fear has brought us here, now.

Already the lie is a wedge driven between Alex and me. We both feel it. He talks about wanting to have children soon, and I wonder how he would feel if he knew that Little Lizzie Borden would be their mother.

It's been twenty-four years, but such memories die hard. Will anyone in town recognize me? I wonder. Probably not. But though I agreed to live in this area, I did not agree to live in this town, or in this house. I can't live here. I simply can't.

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To avoid the curiosity in Paley's eyes, I walk over to the mantel and pretend to study it.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Paley asks, the professional enthusiasm of the real estate agent ringing through his somewhat high-pitched voice.

"Yes, it is."

"The master bedroom is very large, and has two separate, wonderfully appointed baths." He opens the door to the bedroom and looks expectantly at me. Reluctantly, I follow him.

Memories flood my mind. Weekend mornings in this room. I used to get in bed with Mother and Daddy. Daddy would bring up coffee for Mother and hot chocolate for me.

Their king-size bed with the tufted headboard is gone, of course. The soft peach walls are now painted dark green. Looking out the back windows I can see that the Japanese maple tree Daddy planted so long ago is now mature and beautiful.

Tears are pressing against my eyelids. I want to run out of here. If necessary I will have to break my promise to Larry and tell Alex the truth about myself. I am not Celia Foster, nee Kellogg, the daughter of Kathleen and Martin Kellogg of Santa Barbara, California. I am Liza Barton, born in this town and, as a child, reluctantly acquitted by a judge of murder and attempted murder.

"Mom, Mom!" I hear my son's voice as his footsteps clatter on

the uncarpeted floorboards. He hurries into the room, energy encapsulated, small and sturdy, a bright quickness about him, a handsome little boy, the center of my heart. At night I steal into his room to listen to the sound of his even breathing. He is not interested in what happened years ago. He is satisfied if I am there to answer when he calls me.

As he reaches me, I bend down and catch him in my arms. Jack has Larry's light brown hair and high forehead. His beautiful blue eyes are my mother's, but then Larry had blue eyes, too. In those last moments of fading consciousness, Larry had whispered that when Jack attended his prep school, he didn't want him to ever have to deal with the tabloids digging up those old stories about me. I taste again the bitterness of knowing that his father was ashamed of me.

Ted Cartwright swears estranged wife begged for reconciliation...

State psychiatrist testifies ten-year-old Liza Barton mentally competent to form the intent to commit murder....

Was Larry right to swear me to silence? At this moment, I can't be sure of anything. I kiss the top of Jack's head.

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"I really, really, really like it here," he tells me excitedly.

Alex is coming into the bedroom. He planned this surprise for me with so much care. When we came up the driveway, it had been festooned with birthday balloons, swaying on this breezy August day—all painted with my name and the words "Happy Birthday." But the exuberant joy with which he handed me the key and the deed to the house is gone. He can read me too well. He knows I'm not happy. He is disappointed and hurt, and why wouldn't he be?

"When I told the people at the office what I'd done, a couple of the women said that no matter how beautiful a house might be, they'd want to have the chance to make the decision about buying it," he said, his voice forlorn.

They were right, I thought as I looked at him, at his reddish-brown hair and brown eyes. Tall and wide-shouldered, Alex has a look of strength about him that makes him enormously attractive. Jack adores him. Now Jack slides from my arms and puts his arm around Alex's leg.

My husband and my son.

And my house.

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