

A Different Woman, 11-12

The scream slashed through her slumber, dragging her into consciousness. Mary Baldwin sat up in bed, drenched in a cold sweat. She was sure it was nothing, probably just a dream. After all, the amount of anxiety from the wedding combined with the thin mountain air was probably just toying with her dreams. Glancing nervously around the room and at her sleeping husband, Arthur, Mary lit a candle and walked over to the bookshelf, hoping to rid her mind of the chilling shriek. The house, perched upon a desolate cliff, stood as silently as the night itself.

What a joy it had been, the wedding. The scene had been wonderful. The sun had just started to set over the hills, the summer horizon glowing like the last embers from a fire. The hectic atmosphere of the preparations for the day had finally taken a backseat to the beautiful scenery and the new life that she was about to embark upon. Oh how lovely the ceremony had been; she could still feel the white silk kiss her skin. Her father, although on his last legs, had walked her down the aisle to a grinning Arthur. She had felt incredibly strong, the excitement washing away the nervousness. Both families watching on as the vows were said, Mary's heart had nearly burst with delight; it had all come together. Afterwards, the party had been both relaxing and jubilant, the smiles and good spirits as contagious as laughter. The day had been as close as one could have gotten to perfect, and yet Mary could not have helped but feel a vast sense of emptiness by the end.

Mary's sister Helen had been absent. Having lost her only child to pneumonia at a very young age, Helen had disappeared into the Baldwin summer house located in the Matterhorn mountain range, a jagged rock formation that seemed to pierce the sky as it rose from the valley. After weeks with no sort of communication from Helen to her friends or family, local police had been sent to search the house one month after the disappearance. The officers, finding the house empty, deemed Helen deceased. Shock had rippled throughout the family; nobody had foreseen such a reaction from Helen. She had always been the stable one. The house

A Different Woman, 11-12

remained uninhabited that summer, the walls left without the laughter of the Baldwin family to bring them alive.

It had been a year since her sister had vanished. The house had always been the elephant in the room in any sort of family gathering, for nobody dared to visit it. Too closely affiliated with Helen's disappearance, they hoped that the issue would resolve itself. However, Mary had seen no better time than the weeks after the wedding to drive out any sort of taboo that remained within the stone walls of the house; so she and her husband had decided to spend a week in the heights of the Matterhorn.

After waking up at the crack of dawn, the drive to the gondola had been a slow, rocky ride; the ascension a trip that seemed to last an eternity, slower than she could ever remember. The faded red paint had visibly peeled from the walls of the house after a year unattended, vulnerable to the full force of the mountain climate. Eager to find escape from the frigid outdoors, the sun all but set after the everlasting day of traveling, they had immediately gone to bed, their fatigue a deadweight on their consciousness. Yet mere hours afterwards, the screech had shocked Mary out of her slumber.

Mary now traced her hands along the spines of the dusty Victorian novels, *Sherlock Holmes* and *Dracula* dormant beneath her fingertips. She wondered if their stories had ever been told; her sister had never been much of a reader. Mary slowly began to sob. Helen had been all that a younger sister could ask for. She had comforted Mary when she was sad, given her advice in difficult times, and had always been there for her. Helen had baked her cake on her birthday each and every year, which had never ceased to delight Mary. Helen had not only been Mary's older sister, she had been Mary's best friend. Helen, always known as a caring mother, had been left a different woman after the sickness had proven too much for her newborn. She would go days without speaking, sometimes screaming out for her child in the middle of the night, hoping one night those cries would be

A Different Woman, 11-12

answered. Mary wiped her tears and climbed back into bed, hoping to find solace in the soft fabric sheets.

As she blew out the candle, a scream erupted from down the hall. Mary, jolted out of bed by the piercing sound, quickly relit the candle and walked into the hallway. Portraits of knights and nobles stared down at her from either side, but none could tell her who or what had made the sound. Mary, trembling with a strong combination of fear and excitement, reached the end of the hallway. There she looked down on to the lower level of the house to see a figure dart into the downstairs hallway. This high up in the mountains, completely removed from electricity let alone human life, Mary saw no way that somebody could have stumbled upon the house on accident. The house lay on top of a towering bluff, almost as to watch over the valley below it. Covered with snow most of the year, the mountain face's natural dark shade was plastered with white, making access to the Baldwin house incredibly difficult, even in the summer months.

As she made her way down the decrepit stairs, Mary looked out the window. The weather, previously tame, had morphed into a blizzard. Wind relentlessly slammed into the run-down walls of the house, shaking the structure to its foundation as the scenery through the window became completely obscured. The house, a drop of water on the edge of a faucet, seemed ready to go tumbling off the side of the cliff at any moment. Out of the corner of her eye, Mary saw something slip into the kitchen. Mary turned the corner and whipped open the door. Two places were set at the table, with the candles lit and one chair slightly ajar as to invite a hungry guest to sit down and eat. Mary took a seat, cautiously looking around. She didn't remember having set the table, but it could have slipped her mind. From the kitchen wafted a smell thick with nostalgia.

As the smell of birthday cake reached her nose from the stone-cold oven, she began to weep. Memories flowed faster than the tears, bringing her back to summers in the Aosta Valley. She remembered running barefoot through the tall

A Different Woman, 11-12

Swiss grass, the sun creating a familiar warmth that spread from her neck down to her toes. Her pockets filled with alpine flowers, Mary remembered the best view in the world from the edge of the cliff looking out. She remembered coming back to a house in which everyone was happy. The smell brought her back to birthday celebrations from years past, back to better times. She realized that she had never truly gotten over Helen's disappearance; it had always haunted the back of her mind. The days after Helen had left had been sickening, and time had done almost nothing to help her get over the fact that she would most likely never see her sister again. Still in a daze, she glanced down at her plate, now noticing a slice of that oh-so-wonderful cake, the white frosting as pure as the cliff's snow. She took a fork from the left side of her place and began to eat, but stopped.

"...Helen? Is that you?"

The door to the kitchen had slammed shut, and Mary heard footsteps scampering away. She started out of her chair so quickly that she slipped, hitting her head as she fell. Weak yet determined, Mary ran after the sound of the footsteps. Bursting through the kitchen door, she scanned the house. Helen was alive! She had always wanted to believe it, but now she was sure. Her world had been revived, reinvigorated, restored. The emptiness had been filled... but she had to be sure. Hail and snow pounded the walls of the house, slowly chipping away at the tile roof.

Following the footsteps, Mary scurried around the ground floor. They had come from the bathroom, no, the drawing room! She stopped, panting, her eyes darting from side to side, searching for some hint as to where Helen had gone. As she went to pick up the candle and continue the search, her back to the door, she heard a whisper cry out from directly behind her.

"Mary... you finally came for me... nobody else would..."

A Different Woman, 11-12

Mary froze; she knew the voice. She couldn't have imagined it. She ran towards Helen's words, slowly letting go of the candle as it fell to the ground and was immediately extinguished by the snow that was now beneath her feet.

"A baby catching pneumonia? What a sick, sick world we live in. For months I've searched for her, she needs treatment! They can't handle that sort of infection at such a young age...".

Snow pummeled her body as she struggled to stay upright; the storm had reached its peak. Nonetheless, she chased the voice as Helen had chased the voice of her baby, past the front yard of the house until she found herself standing on the edge of a cliff. Helen stood directly in front of Mary, her arms outstretched and a wide grin on her face with the swirling snow as a backdrop. Mary's toes gripped the edge of the ridge, the wind from the blizzard rocking her from side to side. Mary stared straight ahead, off the cliff and into the distance, her eyes had gone blank. It was the best view in the world.

"I've had nobody... But I have you now, Mary. I can stop searching for her... my baby... and you can stop searching for me".

The faintest hint of smile formed on Mary's face as she stepped forward, her face stained with frozen tears.

~

A cold breeze that had wafted in through the open door and into the bedroom sent goose bumps running down Arthur Baldwin's spine. Birds chirped as a few beams of sunlight danced across the floor. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept so well. Before opening his eyes and accepting the end of his slumber, Arthur felt a twinge of guilt. He knew he should have done it months earlier, but because of the preparation leading up to the wedding and the joy that followed, he had decided to put off telling Mary that the police had found Helen's body. A week

A Different Woman, 11-12

after the initial investigation, the authorities had informed Arthur that Helen had been found directly below the ridge, presumably having thrown herself off the side. He had kept this secret from Mary, and he felt terrible. But he knew she was stronger than ever, she seemed to have gotten used to a life without Helen. Today would be the day that he would tell her. Arthur opened his eyes, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and made his way downstairs.