

PATRICIA ST JOHN

RAINBOW
GARDEN



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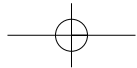
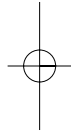
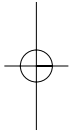
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Land of sunshine

It all began one cold January night, when I was kneeling in front of my mother's electric fire, drying my hair. Outside the snow was falling over London, and the footsteps and the noise of the traffic were muffled. But inside my mother's pink bedroom, with the velvet curtains tightly drawn and the shaded lamps casting down rosy light, we were very warm and snug.

I was enjoying myself, for it was one of those very rare evenings when my mother was at home and seemed to have nothing to do except attend to me. This was so unusual that at first we had not quite known what to say to each other. Instead, we had watched television, and then she had brought out a pile of magazines full of patterns and had let me choose a new summer dress. After that she had washed my hair and sat on a little stool curling it while I watched in the long mirror and ate chocolates.

It should have been a delightful evening. Mrs Moody, the housekeeper, had a day off and had gone home, and the flat somehow seemed brighter without her. I was fond of Mrs Moody, who looked after me far more than my mother did, but she was not a very cheerful person to have about. Being old-fashioned and rather strict, she strongly disapproved of me. She disapproved of Mummy too, because she went to so many parties and stayed out so late at night and got up so late in the morning. Mrs

Moody, in her young days, went to bed at ten and got up at six, and no nonsense, but as Mummy usually went to bed at two and got up at ten, I couldn't see that she was really any lazier than Mrs Moody. Both spent exactly the same number of hours in bed.

Mrs Moody disapproved of me because she thought I had too many party dresses and too many cream cakes for tea. I had heard her tell the cook in the flat downstairs that I should grow up a butterfly like my mother but, although she said it in a disapproving voice, I was pleased, for butterflies were beautiful and bright. I had watched them flitting about in the sunshine on the tulips in St James' Park. Cook had replied that, for all my finery, I was a plain little piece. But I didn't understand what she meant and thought she must be talking about the cake she was making.

"Mummy," I said, tossing back my hair and looking up at her, "you still haven't told me what day I'm going back to school. It must be soon now."

My mother was silent for some minutes and I began to wonder what the matter was. I had asked twice before and she had changed the subject.

"When, Mummy?" I repeated impatiently. "It must be some day next week, and Mrs Moody hasn't looked at my uniform yet, and I know my gym tunic needs letting down."

My mother seemed intent on my curls. Then, instead of answering this simple question, she suddenly said, "Elaine, would you like to go to the country?"

I twisted my head round and stared at her. "The country?" I repeated. "Why, where? Do you mean instead of going to school?"

"Well, no," replied my mother, "not exactly. I mean, you'd go to school in the country, and I'm sure you'd love

it when spring comes. The thing is, Elaine, I've got the offer of a marvellous job. But it means going abroad, and I just can't take you with me. Besides, it is a secretarial job, and I shall be very busy."

"Well," I said after thinking it over for a few minutes, "I think I'd really rather stay here with Mrs Moody. I'd be at school all day, and we'd be all right in the evenings. You'd be home for the holidays, wouldn't you?"

"But, darling," answered my mother rather impatiently, because she always liked everyone to agree with her plans at once, "you don't understand. We couldn't possibly afford to keep on the flat and Mrs Moody just for you. You'll simply love it in the country, and there is such a nice family who are willing to have you. They've got six children and there is a girl called Janet who is only a few months younger than you."

"But if you give up the flat and Mrs Moody," I said blankly, "where will my home be? I mean, I shan't belong anywhere."

My mother gave a little shrug of annoyance, and I knew she thought I was being naughty and difficult, but I couldn't help it. I didn't particularly mind Mummy going because I never saw her much in any case. But Mrs Moody and the flat were a different matter. I should be like a stray cat and not belong anywhere. Besides, if I did go to the country and didn't like it, or if those six children proved unpleasant, where should I come back to?

"Don't be silly, Elaine," pleaded my mother. "Of course when I come back we'll get a new home, and you'll always belong to me. Do try to be sensible. I don't want to leave you, but it will be much better for you later on if I earn more instead of just this part-time job I've been doing. Besides, I've always wanted to go abroad, and this is a marvellous chance."

I sat staring into the red glow of the fire, my mouth closed in an obstinate line. Six children in the country sounded very fierce and dangerous to me. I didn't want to go at all.

My mother seemed quite put out by my silence. She started again in a coaxing voice: "You've no idea how nice it will be. And I've taken such trouble over finding a really nice place for you. Mrs Owen was at school with me and, although we didn't keep in touch, I liked her better than any other girl I knew. Then, when your daddy was killed, she wrote to me. She saw the news of the plane crash in the paper, and she wanted to know all about you and asked if she could be of any help. Of course, you were only tiny then. Anyway, I wrote to her a little while ago and asked if she knew of a nice boarding school. She answered by return of post, offering to have you in her home, so that you could go to day school with her daughter, Janet. It was very, very good of her, Elaine, and you must try to be a sensible girl. France isn't far away, and I shall come over and see you from time to time."

I could not explain that that was not the part I minded, because I was quite used to not seeing my mother. So I just sat silent, but I could see her face by glancing in the mirror, and it was clear that she was worried and frowning.

"Elaine," she said suddenly, "I'm going to have a little party tomorrow night to say goodbye to a few friends. You can help get everything ready, and then you can dress up in your best party dress and come to the beginning of it. Won't that be fun?"

I looked up quickly. "Tomorrow? Already?" I cried. "Then when am I going?"