

## Sunny Days Drifting In

by

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I was four years old when I first saw Sunny. I looked up from my marble war—reds against blues—to see her standing right there in my room. The breeze coming in the open window made her flowing white dress billow, almost like she was part of the curtains. The sunlight danced across her flaxen hair, and she smiled at me a little, one side of her mouth turned up.

I should have been scared, but I wasn't.

“Who are you?” I asked in my little girl voice. “Why are you in my room?”

“So, this is *your* room?” she asked with a slight southern accent. “Land Sakes, you keep it messy in here.” She pranced across a slew of toys and plopped down on the carpeted floor across from me, her long skirt swishing as she moved. “Can I play?”

That day, Mom had just baked cookies, and the smell crept across the floor as if it were on a mission. “Vera,” she called to me. “Cookies.” I ran to the kitchen and brought back some chocolate delights, but Sunny didn't want any. She never ate.

She never left my room either, so I spend most of my childhood indoors. Mom would pester me.

“Why don't you play outside for a bit, Vera? It's a nice day.” I didn't want to because there was nothing to do out there, and Sunny wouldn't go with me. Besides, Sunny and I played fun games like Cops and Robbers or Hide the Rabbit. We had tea parties and played school.

My playmate wasn't there every day, but that was fine because I got tired of her hanging around my room all the time. Sometimes, though, she protected me, like the time I saw the yellow eyes. That was the only time I saw Sunny during the night.

I guess I never thought much about her when I got older. She just, kind of, disappeared, and that seemed right to me.

My Sunny days were officially over when Mom died and Dad started drinking. Being a teenage girl was rough, but living with no mom and an alcoholic father made me feel sick almost all the time. I turned to the only place that offered me any comfort—food—which made me a plumpish, frizzy-haired nerd with black glasses to match the darkness in my heart. I never invited anyone over because I didn't know what would be waiting for me at home.

Sometimes Dad was sober, or partially sober, but he surprised me almost daily with a new idea gone wrong. Once, I found the barbecue grill going in the kitchen, charcoals fuming the whole house.

“What?” he yelled, wearing his tool belt as an apron, barbecue fork in hand. “I’m makin’ somethin’.” Whether it was holes in walls, food spills poorly cleaned up, or cigarettes burning on the couch, my anxiety levels were highest when school was over. I could smell the bad night that lay ahead when I opened the door. It wasn’t the scent of the alcohol either; it was the pickles dribbled across the kitchen floor or the piles of sawdust in the chairs that let me know it would be another long night of name calling and accusations.

I told myself life wasn’t that bad. My friends had worse struggles—actually, they weren't my friends; they were my acquaintances. I knew all of them, overheard their ordeals, but no one really became a close friend to me like Sunny had been. I suspected it was Sunny’s fault that I couldn’t make friends. Then I decided it was no one's fault but my own, since I was positive that Sunny was a mere figment of my imagination.

Somehow, I made it through high school graduation and found an in-state college close enough to be affordable yet far enough away to begin living my own life. For the first time since Sunny, friendships began to form. I even had my first serious relationship with a guy. Tomas wasn't exactly tall, dark, and handsome. He was a little overweight and looked me square in the eye, but I loved his spiked black hair and stubbly chin. We would graduate together and then go on with our "happily ever after."

Dad, however, had other plans. He didn't make it to my college graduation to meet Tomas because he managed to have a heart attack and die during finals week, leaving me orphaned at the age of twenty-three.

Tomas got me through that week. "Vera, Honey," he'd say. "Stay focused and finish this. I know you're sad, but we'll make it." He didn't know what else to say or do. His eyes pleaded with me to cope hour by hour, and somehow, I did. At the graduation ceremony, I cried more than anyone else when a recording of *Pomp and Circumstance* flooded the gym.

Tomas and I were jobless, but a perfectly good house had just been handed to us. There really wasn't a choice but to move back into the old house that Dad left me in his will.

Tomas was a computer science major, and he easily found employment back in my home town. Before I could think, we'd settled in, but the memories hounded me. Thoughts of Mom singing as she folded clothes and Dad coloring Easter eggs followed me through my days. The sorrow of my lonely childhood pressed against me, which made me cling to Tomas during this time of grief. I didn't think about Sunny at all.

Tomas was the one who first mentioned the noises in the night. "Vera, do you have a TV or something hooked up in the spare bedroom?" he asked.

"No," I said. The "spare bedroom" was my old room. We slept in the room formerly occupied by my parents. "Why would you ask me that?"

“I just thought I heard something last night.” He rubbed the stubble on his chin.

“Sounded like someone crying or laughing.”

“You’re imagining things,” I said, plopping a pillow across his face. “If you hear it again, you have my permission to wake me up.”

He didn't wake me up, but I heard it anyway. I told myself it was an old house. Old houses settle and creak and moan.

Then I started to think about Sunny again. The child in me had made her up as my imaginary friend, but I couldn't shake her free from the haze of my mind. She was so real at the time. It must have been those crazy thoughts about Sunny in my mixed-up head that caused the dream.

I had given birth to a child and was in my old bedroom rocking this little bundle of blankets. It was one of those dreams that makes a person believe it's real life. I experienced every emotion that went along with the joy of motherhood. Tomas hovered over me, admiring our new child, and when I looked into its small face, I saw the oversized face of Sunny staring up at me.

Instead of being frightened by the dream, I just held my baby and rocked her in my arms as if it were perfectly natural to have Sunny's big head on my baby. Only afterwards, when I thought about it, did it spook me. I didn't tell Tomas about the dream.

The next day shone bright and cheery, so a little house cleaning felt in order. My old room was still packed with moving boxes that needed to be sorted, so I opened the long rectangular window and let the breeze blow against the thin, white curtains. As I rummaged through a box full of old school papers and computer parts, I sensed a presence. I glanced at the sunshine, knowing. The scene was almost like that first day when I saw her skirt billow in the breeze with the curtains.

Sunny's face was blank and bewildered, so I didn't scream or run out of the room. I became petrified—frozen with fear at the sight of her and of who or what she might be. I shut my eyes, forcing myself to breathe in and out. She was gone when I opened them. Backing out of the room, I banged the door shut without losing focus on the place where she'd been.

That night, Tomas complained about the draft coming from under the door to the spare room and accused me of forgetting to shut the window. "I did forget," I said, which made a good excuse as to why I didn't go back in there.

"Would you shut it for me, please?" I asked in my sweetest voice.

"I guess," he said as he threw off the covers and slapped his bare feet against the hard floor.

I watched his face when he came back into our bedroom. He didn't act like he'd seen anything. Now, the question was, had I?

My night was filled with visions of Sunny. I tried to remember the last time I saw her but couldn't. I concentrated on what she looked like, but I just kept remembering the time when I saw the yellow eyes in the dark. They were real. I knew they were, and if that was so, then she had to be real too.

I was sure she would be waiting for me whenever I decided to go back into that room; and since I couldn't face another tormented night of her memories, I opened the door the very next day. She wasn't there and I had no desire to hang out in that room forever, so I spent the day scouring out years of filth from the kitchen.

The next afternoon I couldn't resist looking for her once more. My rational mind took charge in the daylight, and I was more than sure that I'd made her up. I'd had a weird hallucination. It could be considered normal in a time of grieving. It was the lingering memories of my lost childhood resurfacing that made me think I saw her. That was all.

Then, there she was!

This time she stood among the boxes in the closet. Her face wasn't malicious as I halfway expected, even feared. It was kind and it was smiling at me—one side turned up. She wore that same simple dress, and when she spoke, the words hung in the air and drifted around me. “Why, I remember you when you were this high.” She held up her hand to her narrow waist. “We’ve got a lot of catching up ta do. Want ta have a tea party?”

That was when I lost it.

“You can go back to whatever hell you came from and leave me alone!” I was screaming and crying and freaking out in general as I ran from the room. When Tomas came home from work, he found me crying on the couch in the living room.

“I don’t feel very good,” I said. It was all I could say. He’d never believe a fruitcake like me anyway.

Sunny never left my thoughts that night, and I was afraid. Daylight once again diminished my fears; so after Tomas left for work, I contemplated going into the room again. Maybe I could talk to her. After all, I knew Sunny as well as I knew myself.

“Hello.” I suppose that was a stupid thing to say. She knew I was there. I collapsed in Mom’s old rocker facing the window and tried again. “Sunny.” I stated the name a little coarser than I’d meant to. I closed my eyes, thinking how incredibly stupid this was.

“Little One.” I just about jumped out of my skin when she said that. I’d totally forgotten she used to call me that.

She looked sad, wagging a finger at me like I was in trouble with her.

“I can forgive your anger,” she said. “Just tell me why?” She was right in front of me with her hands on her hips now.

“Why?” I repeated like an idiot, looking up at her from my seat in the rocker.

“Yes. Why did you yell at me? What's upsetting you, Child? I'm so happy ta see you again. Don't you want ta sit here for a spell?” She sat on the floor and gazed up at me with those opal eyes I remembered so well. The fear began to subside as I looked into her face, the shimmering hair, the half smile, the billowing white dress. I didn't know how to tell her that she shouldn't be here. Didn't she know how wrong this was?

“It can't be that bad, Darling.” How long had I been staring at her?

“You're Sunny.” That was obvious.

“Well, at least you didn't forget my name.” She tapped the side of the rocker with her palm.

“The thing is,” I began, “I don't really think you should be here.”

“I knows that, Child, but I ain't got no other place ta go. Now, don't you worry none 'bout me. I'm going ta stay right here.”

“You've been here a long time,” I said. “Haven't you?”

“I suppose I have.”

“Um, how old are you?”

“Thirty-one,” she answered in a matter-of-fact way.

“I'm twenty-three,” I said. “You were thirty-one when I was a little girl and this was my bedroom.” Sunny touched her forehead like she used to do when she was trying to remember something important. “Sunny,” I whispered, “I think you belong in another place. You really shouldn't be here.”

“I knows where I needs ta be, Baby Doll. Right here with you.”

“But isn't there somewhere for you to go?”

“There used ta be.” She continued to tap her forehead. “I don't remember how ta get there.”

“How does it work?” I asked. “Your coming and going, never getting older.” I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer to this one.

“It's just a flow,” she said, pausing for a long moment before beginning again. “Oh, Little One, I don't know where I go when I'm not here. I feel like I've been in a cold place for a very long time.” I'd never seen Sunny cry before. I couldn't believe this was what I'd been afraid of all this time—just a lost soul. “I don't want ta go back ta the cold place. Will you keep me here, Sweetie Pie? Please, let me stay.”

“Isn't there someplace else you can go?” I asked. “Someplace nice and warm?”

“I don't know how. I think the door is closed off.”

“Why didn't you go there before?”

“I had ta protect you, Darling.”

Dare I ask.

“Protect me from what?”

“You see, Baby Doll, when someone dies in a room, it opens a door. When the door is open, anybody can go right through, and I couldn't let ‘em in.”

“The yellow eyes,” I whispered as the tears streaked down my face too.

“I protected you.” There was something there. Something bad.

“Are we safe in this house?” The yellow eyes I'd seen as a child really scared me, and I couldn't stand the thought of ever seeing them again.

“Land Sakes, YES. There ain't been nobody bothered that door in ages. Besides, it's closed now.”

“I don't understand why you can't find another door or something.”

“It's been too long. I go ta the cold now. You can stay here with me for a while, Sugar Plum. Keeps me nice and warm.”



“I can't,” I whispered. “I wish you could find that ‘flow’ that you mentioned before and find that place where I think you’re supposed to be.”

“The flow is life, Child. That’s it!” She tapped her forehead, one side of her mouth smiling up. “That's why I come ta you.”

“Sometimes I don't feel very alive, Sunny.”

“But you are full of life,” she said, her eyes sparkling with a new glow. “Maybe more so than you know because I don't think it was you that pulled me out of the cold. I think it was that small life inside of you.”

Then a sweeping sensation crept over me like a fresh blanket straight from the dryer. Her words echoed in my head. *The flow is life. The flow is life.*

“I never thought I could find the way again. Thank you, Child.”

The white mist surrounded me. Sunny's presence went around and through me. I felt pressure on my stomach as she entered the womb.

I was wrong. My Sunny days weren’t over. They were just drifting in.