Winter in the Garden

by LeBibish

Summary

When the world ends, Mary hides in the garden.

Not for long, because she needs to get on with surviving the end of the world, but for a while and whenever she can get away with it.

Notes

Notes: This story is based off of the book The Secret Garden and does not take into account any changes or casting decisions either of the films might make. I assumed that the date of publication (1911) was the date that the book took place in. The inspiration for this particular apocalypse is based on actual events, but changed quite a bit.

*A further note on language: The Secret Garden used a fair amount of written dialect to show the particular and distinctive speech common to Yorkshire. I think it was used to good effect because it reminded the reader that this place was basically a foreign country for Mary and she treated the dialect as a new language to learn. I am not comfortable in my own ability to portray it well and I think in this context it would be more distracting than useful. I made an effort to try and make it clear who is speaking Yorkshire and who is not. For the most part though, this isn’t heavy on dialogue anyways.

When the world ended, Mary hid in the garden. With its high walls around her, it was as if nothing had changed. The roses bloomed, the grass grew, the robins sang. How could the world end when it was summer in Yorkshire?
Mary’s world had ended once before, although at the time she hadn’t understood what was happening. Now, she knew, there would be no manor house half way around the world with an uncle and cousin to take her in. Now, it was not just her world ending.

The garden was her only refuge. With its stone walls closed around her, she couldn’t hear the wailing that echoed through the manor. The sweet scent of the flowers overwhelmed the sick room stench that clung to her clothes. Her hands, sunk deep into the black earth, felt cleaner than they had in weeks.

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It started slowly, the end of the world. Or perhaps it was simply overwhelmed by how much else was happening in the world. Mary might not even have been aware of it at first, if it hadn’t been for her uncle. Archibald Craven still traveled; he wanted, he told her, to truly enjoy all of the places he had been—to see, for the first time, the beauty that he had been blind to in his grief. As part of rejoining the world, he also brought the world in to the manor—guests he met during his travels, books and toys and sweets from faraway lands, and newspapers.

Mary, for all that she didn’t care much for schooling, had become a scholar of languages. She liked the thought of being able to listen and understand what other people were saying without them knowing; and to speak with them, if she cared to. She practiced the little Hindustani she could remember and the governesses her uncle arranged for her were well-versed in French. Miss Forrester, Mary’s last governess, had even been able to teach her a few German phrases as well. When Colin had been home, Mary had listened in on his tutors’ instructions in Latin and Greek as well, although she didn’t much care for them. Besides these more formal languages, she maintained that Yorkshire was its own language and counted it among those she knew.

At the time just before the world’s end, she was learning Spanish, mostly to spite her uncle’s most recent guest, a Portuguese merchant he had met in the mountains many years ago. She found the man revoltingly patronizing. When he had laughed at hearing of her ambitions in language learning and suggested Portuguese as her next language—if she didn’t find it too challenging—Mary had immediately declared Spanish the superior tongue and set herself to mastering it.

He had not stayed at the manor for long.

Uncle Archibald, not entirely aware of Mary’s reasons, had indulged her as he often did. It might have been difficult for him to ship in Spanish books and newspapers, but if so he did not tell Mary and she did not pay much attention or particularly care. It was enough that he had them brought to her because she wanted them.
Newspapers were the best source for language learning, to Mary’s mind. They tended to be more simply written than the books and required less time and intense concentration. Some of the books gave her headaches and she was obliged to escape out into the gardens or onto the moor. As much as she loved Yorkshire, being outside at the time was less a refuge and more a constant reminder of what—of who—was missing. The newspapers gave her other things to think about.

The newspapers from Spain were strange though. While every other country, it seemed, was concerned with the end of the war, the Spanish newspapers focused on a sickness plaguing the country. Reading about that made Mary feel uncomfortable, strangely hot and achingly lonely. She didn’t like to think about people being ill. She didn’t like reading about the war either, though. Even though it was ending, Colin and Dickon weren’t home yet and it made her cross and sullen. She felt almost as contrary and cross as she had when she had first come to England.

The newspapers were her first warning.

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The second warning came from Martha.

Mary was old enough for her own maid but she vastly preferred Martha’s company. A ladies’ maid was supposed to be as close to a companion and friend as a lady might have among the servants—Mary didn’t like any of the ones Mrs. Medlock had hired for her. The most recent one had flounced off to another position at an estate in Sheffield and Mary was happy to have her gone.

Martha was always the substitute for when Mary had managed to drive another ladies’ maid away. She didn’t know any fancy hair styles and had no interest in learning them and she expected Mary to do much more work in taking care of herself than the more well-schooled maids did. But Mary found she rather preferred doing the work herself. If she was feeling cross, she could leave the room as messy as her own mind, and with no one constantly following behind her and tidying it away. Later, straightening the mess herself felt as if she was organizing her thoughts as well.

Martha still managed the ironing and laundry and any meals Mary took in her room. And a good many other chores Mary didn’t notice at all.

Except when Martha asked for extra leave to go home though. Dr. Craven had several sick patients in the village and he had asked Martha’s mother, Mrs. Sowerby, to help tend to them. Martha was needed at home to watch over her youngest siblings and the house while Mrs.
Sowerby went from cottage to cottage, watching this and that person.

When Dickon and later Colin had left, Mary had felt alone and abandoned. Now, without a ladies maid or Martha, she found herself rather more alone than she had been accustomed to being in years. Mrs. Medlock, noting a rather sulky air around the young woman, asked Mr. Craven to fetch Miss Forrester back to the estate. A governess wasn’t a ladies maid, but if nothing else Mary’s temper at being treated like a child in the nursery might shake her out of brooding.

Martha’s absence was Mary’s second warning.

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From there, the end of world gained speed; like a wagon let loose at the top of a tall, steep hill, it happened in bursts and bumps and crashes.

Word came in from the village that more and more people were sick. Young and old, strong and weak, the illness followed no pattern.

The train stopped running.

There was no mail; no newspapers.

The deliveries of food from the village stores slowed, then stopped. The butcher was sick. The baker wasn’t sick, but his wife and children were. Some of the farms still sent in food, but it wasn’t dependable.

Misselthwaite Manor had experienced its share of rationing in the war, but never enough to leave its residents hungry. Just enough to make them feel as if they were making some sort of patriotic sacrifice in having shorter meals, with less of their favorites.

Now, they were hungry.

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That summer was hard. More and more people grew sick. Some lingered, weak and helpless for
days before starting to recover. Sometimes a person would seem fine until they suddenly collapsed. Most of those people died.

The Manor was spared the worst of the sickness—they isolated themselves from the villagers and lived off the manor’s kitchens and stored foods. Martin, the gamekeeper, started hunting in the parkland and brought deer and red grouse to the table. Mary haunted the gardens.

Yorkshire had never been as hot as India; Mary was sure it never could be. But somehow the summer’s heat was oppressive and exhausting. Fear seemed to clog the very air as everyone tried to avoid each other’s company. The slightest cough or sneeze raised suspicious glares and outright shunning.

The moors were oddly still, as if the wind too was stifled by the sickness.

One early morning, Mary woke to a dark room, no fire warming the hearth or cheerful Martha greeting her. She felt lethargic and overheated, her thoughts fuzzy. There was a small snake crossing the floor in front of her bed.

There had been a snake in India, she remembered. A small brown snake moving across her room and she had been struck by the sensation that they were the only beings alive, just the snake and her.

That had turned out to be true.

Mary jumped out of bed, her lethargy overwhelmed by a deep fear. She didn’t bother to dress or even to pull her dressing gown over her night clothes. She slammed open her door, rushed down the hallways full of ancient paintings and rusty suits of armor, and burst into the kitchen.

Everyone turned to stare at her. Mistress Mary was not known for caring much about propriety or impressing anyone, but it was still quite unusual to see her burst into a room, much less in her night clothes.

She was almost gasping for her, drawing deep breathes into her lungs. Her fists were clenched at her sides but her face was blank as it ever was when she was discomfited.

Mrs. Medlock, who had come to feel a reluctant affection for the contrary young woman, stood from the table she had been sitting at. She shooed the maids and footmen and kitchen girls back to
from the table she had been sitting at. She shooed the maids and footmen and kitchen girls back to their work and then calmly turned to Mary.

“Is there something needed, Miss Mary?”

Mary eyed the older woman, a hint of gratitude flickering in her face. “Yes. Yes, I…breakfast. I wish to eat my breakfast outside today. Do not bring it to my room.”

“The outside breakfast table isn’t set up” Mrs. Medlock said disapprovingly. There was no need to make extra work for everyone, no matter how discomfited the child was.

“I’ll take it out to garden. I can eat quite well outside without a breakfast table.”

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It wasn’t the last time Mary, who had never much liked people, found herself searching out others over that summer. The Manor House had always seemed a bit enchanted because of its great emptiness. It was a palace to explore that was Mary’s alone—Colin’s and Dickon’s too, once upon a time.

Now she could hardly bear the quiet of the rooms. The sensation of being alone left Mary shivering in the still oppressive heat.

Uncle Craven did not seem to share Mary’s fears. He drew further and further away from everyone, choosing to spend his time in his rooms alone. He regressed to old ways, strong habits overwhelming any good intentions he might have had. Mary and Mrs. Medlock managed the house.

Dr. Craven stopped in to look at his brother only once. He was pale and thin, his eyes shadowed. The servants, who had known him for years, treated him with a wary suspicion. Who could say which houses he had been tending to or what shadow of death might be following him?

He left a prescription with Mrs. Medlock—fresh air and as much hearty food as could be shared; stubborn in his own way, Archibald Craven would have none of it. The doctor did not come back.

As the summer lengthened, the sickness barely seemed to falter. News trickled in from the village
slowly; many of the servants had family there. A few letters made it past the gates; more often someone would come up to the guardhouse to share the most recent deaths. The baker’s children recovered; his wife did not. The butcher’s entire family was gone, and his neighbors too. Susan Sowerby showed up at the manor with her children bundled up in all the clothing they owned, red-faced and sweating.

Martin was guarding the gates to the Manor grounds, with a few of the gardeners and footmen with him. It was one of the younger boys who ran the two miles from the gates to the house to fetch Mary. Martin wasn’t letting the Sowerbys in.

Mary near flew down the gravel avenue. She found the men standing in front of the gate, facing against a row of Sowerby children in heavy clothing and carrying small bundles. Mrs. Sowerby stood behind them.

“What is happening here?” Mary asked. “Why are you blocking the gate? This is Martha and Dickon’s family. You know them.”

“They’re sick! Just look at ‘em.” Martin’s voice was thick and drawling. “Can’t come in or they’ll get the rest of us sick to.”

Mary, who enjoyed mirroring the speech of those around her, found herself instead using the crispest, clearest English that an officer’s daughter had at her command. “Stop being ridiculous, Martin. Look closer! These children are not sick—they are overdressed! And tired, I do not doubt. Let them pass, at once.”

“But Missus Mary—“

“I said let them pass.” If she had understood people just a bit better, she might have praised the men at the gate for doing a thorough job, for trying to keep the people at the manor safe. Instead, furious that some of the few people she truly cared about were being denied entrance to her home, Mary stared down the gamekeeper and his gate guards until they had all looked away or down at the ground.

She waved the children into the park and then turned to Mrs. Sowerby to welcome her to Misselthwaite. The cheerful woman who had been Mary’s ideal image of a mother for several years looked tired and worn and instead of thanking Mary or embracing her, she took a step back. A step away from Mary, from the gates of the Manor, and from her children.
“There now. You’re all here and you’ve got your clothes and things with you. Elizabeth Ellen, you’re in charge of your brothers and sisters. Listen to Miss Mary and Mrs. Medlock and don’t cause no trouble.”

“Yes mama.”

“Tha’s a good child.”

Mary felt incredibly lost. When the children turned and trouped up the road to the Manor House, she found herself drifting along behind them like a boat loose from its mooring would drift in a current. All of the passion and strength that had powered her run to the gates and that had cowed the grown men guarding them was gone.

Why had Mrs. Sowerby not come with her children? Why were they here at all?

Where was Martha?

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Autumn started to chill the air.

The trains still were not running.

Mary, who had once placidly said that she had never known what it was to feel hunger, started worrying about food. Mrs. Medlock had brought their rapidly dwindling stores to her attention after the cook had brought it to the housekeeper. All summer their meals had been getting smaller and fewer; it was the first time Mary had ever not been able to eat her fill. It was nothing compared to what was coming.

With the village shops all closed and neither the train nor the mail coach running, they would have to figure out how to get food to the manor. Mrs. Medlock brought Mr. Roach, the head gardener, and Martin in to the manor house to talk with Mr. Craven. But when they came and were seated in one of the studies, it was Mary who met with them.

Her uncle was still hiding in his rooms and refusing to come out. As the only other family member
present, Mary felt responsible.

It did not start well. The two men were clearly uncomfortable in the dark room, almost dwarfed by the ancient and heavy furniture. Martin glared at Mary but refused to meet her eyes. She found herself sitting still and straight in her chair, blank faced and quiet.

Mr. Roach had his under-gardeners working diligently in the kitchen gardens. The gardens had been expanded and several flower gardens had been given over to vegetables since the war started. Martin was taking out several footmen and showing them the best places to shoot deer and grouse and catch rabbits in the park’s woods and out on the nearby moors.

It wouldn’t be enough.

The men spoke and argued and paced around the room. Mrs. Medlock and the cook had added their own thoughts on rationing and the current state of supplies but once they were finished the cook left and Mrs. Medlock faded into the background of the room. Mary stayed in her seat, still and pale and blank faced as a statue.

“There’s farms with few enough people to work them and some with no one. They’ll not be as well-tended as I’d like, but there’ll be somewhat there to take and keep us fed.” Mr. Roach had spent most of an hour trying to convince Martin to send people out of the manor.

Martin argued back that it wasn’t worth the risk, that it left the Manor vulnerable to thieves and poachers if they didn’t have enough men at the gates, that the farms would still have their own people there. Where Mr. Roach had only one argument—they were going to run out of food—Martin seemed to have a new reason not to go every time he spoke.

Mary thought of him at the gate, blocking the Sowerbys from coming in. She’d been right when she said he knew them—everyone knew them and everyone loved them. Susan Sowerby and her husband were greatly respected across the moors and Martha and Dickon were great favorites of everyone at the manor. Seeing Martin try to keep the family out of Misselthwaite had enraged Mary, but she suddenly recognized the expression that had been hidden in his face and his trembling fists.

He wore the same expression now. Barely hidden, peeking out of the corners of his eyes and through the twist of his mouth: fear.

Mary was afraid too and she hated it. She hated being afraid and she hated doing things because
she was afraid and she hated not doing things because she was afraid.

When Mary stood suddenly from her chair, both men turned to look at her, their mouths still open to argue but their words lost in surprise.

“She need the food. I refuse to die of starvation hiding here like children scared of the dark. We will send people out to the farms.” She glared at Martin.

He glared right back. “This’s not something you can win just ‘cause you want to! You can’t will away this sickness! It spreads and keeps spreading and the only thing to do is keep out of its way. Laugh at death if you want, missy, it won’t stop him riding.”

Everyone on the moors knew about Colin’s miraculous recovery—that Mary had found him and out-stubborned him. That he had made himself better by willing it. Everyone on the manor grounds had heard his opinion on Magic and how he had used his cousin’s determination for him to walk as an example.

Mary could feel her face flush hotly, her glare threatening to shatter into tears. Mary hated crying as much as she hated being afraid.

Mr. Roach, eyes flicking back and forth between the tough old gamekeeper and the contrary young lady of the house, silently sank deeper into his chair.

Teeth clenched and voice stilted, Mary kept her eyes locked on Martin. “I lived through the cholera in India. Everyone…I…” Her voice faltered and her fingernails dug into the palms of her hands but she didn’t blink. She refused to blink. “I lived then. Maybe I won’t now. But it will not be because I sat down and let it happen!”

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Some of the farms did have people still at them. Families in mourning, land girls down from the city to take the place of missing farm hands—everyone desperate, everyone scared. Yorkshire stubbornness was forcing them through it though. They were all trying to get as much of the harvest in as they could.

Other farms were silent, sheep scattered wild on the moor, grain starting to fall over from its own weight in fields overrun with mice.
Mrs. Medlock and Mary worked out deals with several of the farming families. A room at the manor for those who wanted it and a portion of any food they helped harvest. Everyone at the Manor took a turn outside, working the farms with people still at them and raiding the gardens and fields left unattended.

No one was willing to walk into the silent houses. Any stores of food they had were left to rot and mice.

Dr. Craven had been found at one of the farms, tending a recovering older couple. Their two sons were gone in their war. Their only daughter died of the sickness they lived through. Dr. Craven chose to move to the manor house. The couple did not.

The flu came in with the harvest. Several footmen died and two of the maids. The butler locked himself in one of the small rooms and refused to come out. His family was one of those that lived in the village. There had been no news from the village since the beginning of fall.

They still needed food for the winter.

Martin and Mary were in charge of the scouting groups. Mary kept track of the maids and gardeners and other household members who were going out, making sure everyone had an equal amount of time assigned and that they could tell the difference between edible and rotten vegetables. Several of the upper house maids couldn’t.

Martin was in charge of the safety of the group because he knew best which footmen could be trusted with a gun.

Everyone reassured each other that it was mostly for feral dogs. No one quite believed it.

The parties going out to the farms became quieter. Nightmares were common.

Then there was the fire. It happened at one of the farmhouses whose fields had been left wild over the fall. Several kitchen maids and the three oldest Sowerby children were there along with two
The children were going through the kitchen garden, pulling up what vegetables were left when it started. The kitchen maids were out in the field.

The footmen admitted to starting the fire—they had seen several bodies in the barn and, terrified of falling ill themselves, had decided to burn the barn to “clean the air.” The fire had caught more quickly and burned much hotter than they had thought. They had burns along their arms and one had a reddened and chapped face.

It had spread across the yard to the house. The children moved quickly, getting out of its way and towards the safety of the road.

Elizabeth Ellen told Mary and Mrs. Medlock she had heard screaming from the house.

They told her it was just the fire burning.

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Mary dreamed of Colin. She dreamed of his cries that had been hidden in the moans of the wind on the moors. She dreamed that he was out on the moors now, screaming.

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There were more people living at Misselthwaite than it had seen in centuries. Rooms Mary had always known as empty and silent were filled with people chattering nervously.

The house felt more lonely and empty than Mary had ever imagined it before.

The butler came out of his rooms, but barely interacted with anyone. Elizabeth Ellen, who was closest to Mary in age, was busy taking care of her younger siblings. Even Miss Forrester, who was there to be Mary’s companion, was subdued and keeping to herself. Dr. Craven seemed to sleep through the days.
He had busy enough nights.

Every cough and chill over the winter sent people into hysterics. The deadly flu, however, seemed to disappear as the snow fell deeper. Mary couldn’t help the feeling that it was biding its time, a living malice directed at destroying her world but holding off for just a while.

Uncle was sick. It wasn’t the flu. Mostly, Mary thought, it was that he had just given up.

Everyone was hungry.

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By springtime, cold, hunger, and despair had taken their tolls and the manor house had seen death more times than Mary cared to think about.

The wailing, wuthering wind seemed to voice everyone’s grief.

To Mary, the house felt alternately stiflingly crowded and desolately empty. Even in the worst weather, she yearned to escape to the garden. Mr. Roach had the men tearing apart the remaining flower beds for more vegetable gardens. Mostly to give them something to do; the ground wasn’t nearly ready even to be prepared for planting.

They left the secret garden alone—Mary kept its gates locked and the key strung on a chain around her neck. It was the only Magic remaining in the world. She waited for the spring to bring it back to life.

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Mary mostly tried to keep away from the many strangers living in the manor house now. The list of people she liked remained small enough to count on her fingers—though she counted the youngest Sowerbys as a single unit. She mostly liked them because they reminded her of Martha and Dickon.

She avoided them as much as possible for the same reason.
Everyone that winter and spring took on a variety of tasks and jobs. Everyone did what they could to keep from being alone with their thoughts.

Mary found herself gravitating to either Mrs. Medlock, who was usually whisking through the house trying to keep track of exactly what everyone was doing, or Miss Forrester, who was searching the library for useful books on farming, medicine and industry. Mary had generally not liked any of her governesses, nor, it must be said, had they liked her. But she had respected Miss Forrester. And the library felt comfortable even if Mary couldn’t bear to open the fairy books she had always preferred.

Fairy stories always had the kind and pretty girls rewarded while the sour and ugly girls were punished. Mary felt like she was being punished, like the entire end of the world was just to spite her.

Miss Forrester was good at catching onto those moods of Mary’s even through her blank-face and straight-backed posture. Whenever Mary started to drift into feeling sorry for herself, Miss Forrester would send her over to another shelf or force her to look for a pile of books written in other languages and sort them into useful and not-useful piles.

Mary had always respected Miss Forrester; Colin and Dickon had liked her.

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It felt like a cold and dreary spring although Mary wasn’t sure if it was actually worse than any other spring she had spent on the moors.

Everyone stopped holding their breath at every cough and sneeze; some of the farming families started making plans to go home.

Mary’s uncle remained in his room.

Mrs. Medlock was queen of the household and Mr. Roach was king of the gardens. Martin fought and argued his way into every decision and Mary made sure to follow along. She didn’t always know what to do and often she simply listened silently, but she had had enough as a child of being dragged here and there in ignorance.
When she did speak up, they listened (if grudgingly, on Martin’s part). She was stubborn and contrary and refused to die. None of the adults would admit it, but they found it rather comforting.

Every night, Mary dreamed of India.

She dreamed of the hot wind and the smell of spice, of her ayah singing her to sleep, of young rajahs draped in jewelry. She dreamed of little snakes wriggling across the floor, small lives continuing on in spite of death. She woke up in the cold, missing the heat that she had always hated.

She dreamed of feasts left abandoned, of empty houses, of her gay and laughing mother lying silently on the floor. She dreamed of the soldier who had told her parents that they should have fled into the hills, should have left, before it was too late.

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Spring dragged along, warming up bit by bit. Mary spent more time in the garden, watching the new life grow. Bulbs started to sprout, the grass greened, the roses sent out new shoots. Robins built nests.

Travelers started to come through with the warming spring. Just a few, some in small groups, many on their own; the cities were emptying out as people fled the crowded closeness and the devastating sickness. They asked for food mostly or sometimes shelter. Martin’s men stopped them at the gates and sent them away.

If they had children or looked nice, sometimes the men would give them directions to the village or to some of the farms that the Manor people hadn’t cleared over the fall and winter. If they looked mean or desperate in the wrong way, Martin would set more men to watching the gates and the borders of the Manor for a few nights.

They couldn’t keep people out of the park entirely; the grounds were simply too large. They watched the gates and roads and kept a constant guard on along the borders of the gardens and the house. All of the garden gates were locked.

Martin started letting some of the sturdier farm girls have guns too. Hunting parties went out onto the moors. They came back with sheep and grouse and scavenged a few vegetables growing wild
in abandoned gardens. Occasionally they caught a few rabbits or deer.

Everyone who left the Manor went armed. Even the older children carried knives. Too many of the wandering travelers proved to be thieves or worse. They were the survivors, after a year of sickness and a harsh cold winter.

No one suggested letting anyone else into the Manor.

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When Mr. Pitcher came into the kitchen on a late spring day, Mary was helping the cook make a list of what was left from winter stores for seed crops.

Mary hadn’t seen her uncle in weeks. Hearing that he had died was not a surprise.

She remembered the first time she had seen him. Remembered standing in the dim room, stiff and uncomfortable and sure that they would not like each other. She how surprised he had seemed, and how willing, to give a strange little girl a piece of earth of her own.

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The balance of power shifted. Mary was the Mistress of the House now and Martin the Master of the Gates. Mrs. Medlock and Mr. Roach were both happy to keep the house and gardens running as they always had, with someone else nominally in charge but their own spheres of influence absolute. They checked in with Mary and Martin and kept the maids and gardeners and cooks and staff busy.

If things were not the same as they used to be, Mrs. Medlock and Mr. Roach preferred not to admit it out loud. Mary was the only member of the family; they chose to defer to her—as long as she listened to their advice and didn’t interfere with the way they ran their people, of course.

All of the men and several of the more determined women spent some time with Martin. He was the one who arranged the patrols at the gates and along the garden walls. He and Mary together decided when to send people out, where they were to go, and what they were looking for.
After the cold, hungry winter, Martin didn’t argue against letting hunting parties outside of the gates. Mary didn’t argue for working with other survivors.

The hunting parties kept to the fields of the abandoned farms and the open spaces of the moor. They didn’t go into the village ever.

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Colin came home.

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Colin came with a group of travelers—the families of several soldiers who had been with him in France.

Colin came, exhausted and weary from war and sickness and a long journey, but confident at least in his welcome home, ready to see his father and cousin; expecting the Manor to be unchanged.

Mary knew this. She knew because she knew Colin, knew the boundless optimism he had clung to after learning to walk. She knew this because she could see it in his eyes, fueling the utter bewilderment and growing outrage as men who had once carried him in his chair through the gardens stopped him from setting foot on the Manor grounds.

She also knew that he had promised all of the people with him a safe place to be. A place full of Magic, with good food and warm beds waiting for them. He had always been oddly magnanimous for such an indulged boy.

Mary knew her cousin.

Martin claimed not to. Master Colin, he argued, was at war. Between war and sickness, how could anyone have survived? The Manor wasn’t open for trade nor was it a resting place for homeless vagabonds.

Mary, who knew Martin quite a bit better now, could see the lies forming in his mouth even before he said them. She knew the fear that gripped him.
When Colin’s temper exploded, she could see the fear growing. As he shouted and roared in front of the gates, it was impossible to pretend he wasn’t Colin, the imperious young prince who had grown up ordering everyone at Misselthwaite around.

They couldn’t deny who he was. They couldn’t deny that this was his place. But all these people with him? All these people who had been out in the world with the sickness? How could they let these people in to their only safe place?

Mary knew, deep in the pit of her stomach, that if they let this group into the Manor, the flu would come back to Misselthwaite. If they turned them away though, then Colin would be left to die alone and without his home. Colin, her cousin, who had yelled at her and laughed with her. Who she had watched learn to walk, to enjoy food, and to believe in Magic. Her cousin who she had grown up with and missed more than her own parents.

Mary stood, frozen at the edge of the road, half-hidden by the trees, as Colin Craven shouted and bullied his way onto his property.

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Colin’s people joined the Manor. Mrs. Medlock found them beds and Mr. Roach started going through his schedules to find some of them work to do. Martin refused to add any of them to his own schedules.

Mary found Colin at the door to his father’s rooms. She still didn’t know what to say to him. It had been nearly two years since they had seen each other; since he had said goodbye to her and his father and rode off to join the war. To find Dickon, he had whispered in Mary’s ear instead of saying goodbye.

Now they were standing in front of the rooms where his father had died. Had given up and left Mary with a house full of terrified people.

Colin was back and nothing was the same.

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Things were better with Colin home. Of course they were. He was her cousin and this was his home; he belonged here. Mary didn’t have to be as lonely because she had family again. They had grown up together, learned to care about others together, and found Magic together. Mary didn’t have to be as frightened all the time either. She wasn’t haunted with thoughts about where he was, what was happening to him or even if anything was happening to him at all. He was there, he was home.

Things were better with Colin home, but they were also worse as well. Everything was different and it was all more noticeable, more real, with Colin there. Now she faced his grief for his father as well as hers for her uncle.

 Mostly, though, it was worse because Colin still believed—in Magic, in the world, that if they tried hard and thought good thoughts that the world would get better—Colin believed harder than ever, it seemed.

And Mary couldn’t.

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Colin joined Mary’s time in the library with Miss Forrester. The older woman was still going through the books, when she wasn’t keeping the younger staff members and children busy teaching them to write and cipher. Over the winter she had organized most of them to pull out farming techniques and practical knowledge. Now she was sorting all of them again, although Mary wasn’t entirely sure what all of her categories were this time.

It was something to do.

Colin gravitated to the more ponderous tomes of philosophy. Occasionally, he would start up a conversation, talking to either Miss Forrester or Mary with the same absent tone of voice.

“When this is over, I think that—“

Mary felt suddenly broken, as if something inside of her had burst.

“It’s never going to be over, Colin!” She was shouting. She hadn’t meant to shout, but she couldn’t stop herself. “There is no after. No later.”
Colin blinked at her, surprised at being interrupted. Miss Forrester silently glided out of the room, a book in each hand.

Mary watched Colin in the second it took to gather himself back together—his weight shifted, his eyes narrowed, his nose lifted up into the air. Part of her was relieved—they needed the rajah, needed his arrogance and unthinking assumptions of obedience. Most of Mary, however, was simply furious. The warmth of her rage momentarily melted the ice that had been encasing her for months on end.

“You don’t know what—“

“No! No! You keep talking about ‘after’ as if everything is going to get better again. It won’t! Doctor Craven cannot fix it. You coming home did not fix it. Nothing will ever fix it. It’s never going to be over because science cannot bring back the dead and there is no Magic. Not anymore. Not ever again.” Her throat was raw and scratched, her words like shards of glass ripping out of her. Colin’s face was pale and he had stepped back, as if those shards were real and he was trying to escape them.

The ice was coming back; a layer of cold surrounding her heart and mind, stifling every emotion. Her fisted hands trembled, bloodless fingers digging into her palms. Mary felt a weight on her shoulder, a gentle touch managing to both calm the fury and warm the ice. At least a bit. She didn’t turn to look, but glared at Colin, her temper fallen back into sullen silence.

Colin left first, before any of them found voice to say anything else.

Mary didn’t dare turn around. She left without confirming that there was no one behind her.

--

The sickness came back at the end of spring. Mary had felt it creeping closer, like a fox stalking a band of chickens left free in a yard. The household blamed the newcomers; the flu must have come in with them. The newcomers protested their innocence; no one had been sick in their group before.

As the sickness continued and the arguments got worse, it became Mary’s people against Colin’s people.
Mary wasn’t entirely sure why she had ‘people’ much less how they could prefer her to Colin. She didn’t even like most people.

Colin was one of the few she did like.

And she wasn’t speaking with him.

--

When they were young, Colin and Mary had believed Dickon was Magic. He could charm the birds out of the sky, the beasts from the fields, and the most contrary of children and grumpiest of old men out of sulking.

By the time he left for the war, a gangly red-haired soldier in ill-fitting clothing following behind his sturdy red-haired father, they still thought he was Magic. Where Mary was the only one who stood up to Colin in a temper and Colin was the only one who could infuriate Mary out of her silent brooding, Dickon was the only one who could soothe them both into peace and good cheer.

Without Dickon, they were uneven and instable. The jagged edges of their missing piece caught and tore at each other.

The stress of the end of the world—which Mary still insisted this was even as Colin insisted that it was a Terrible and Tragic Time That Goodness and Strength of Mind Would Overcome, which made Mary want to hit him—the stress made everything worse. Mary didn’t hit him only because the youngest of the Sowerby children had started following them both around and Mary hated to think of the disappointed look Mrs. Sowerby would give her for perpetuating violence in front of them.

Apparently the children’s own wrestling and tussles didn’t count. Slapping Colin would. Especially since she was pretty sure that if she started, she wouldn’t be able to stop.

The flu seemed perverse and malevolent as it left the oldest and weakest only, taking the strong and the young.
It was a long summer.

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By midsummer, Martin was happily sending Colin’s people out to forage and hunt. Mary was fairly certain this was because he thought there was a chance they wouldn’t come back and she was also pretty sure that Colin knew it too.

Mary was staying out of the meetings now; she could barely stand being in the house at all. Even with all the people there talking and working and making the house so much busier than it had ever been—it felt like a tomb to Mary.

She constantly felt short of breath and she was never hungry at all anymore. It felt like India always had, as if she didn’t belong and the very air was punishing her for existing.

Her only escape was where it had always been—the secret garden, locked and lonely and bursting with new life and bright colors.

--

Colin started joining her in the garden. By mutual agreement, they still didn’t speak. They left the screaming matches to the house and, without saying a word, worked side by side in harmony, weeding and pruning and digging into the dark cool earth.

The secret garden was the only place in the grounds that still had flowers that were just flowers now. Every other inch of earth had been given over to food and herbs and medicines.

Mary wasn’t sure why Mr. Roach had never mentioned using the garden, why Martin had never pushed for a key to the door, why Mrs. Medlock had never complained about the time she spent in the garden instead of helping the household.

She was only desperately grateful for it all. She didn’t know what she would have done if she hadn’t been able to escape to the garden. Didn’t know how she could have kept living with Colin at all if she hadn’t had proof that they could still work together peacefully.
When she slept in the garden, she didn’t dream of her mother or snakes or sickness. When she ate in the garden, her food didn’t taste like ashes and dust. When she was in the garden, she was whole and alive.

Outside of the garden was still a problem.

Adding more people meant they would need more food for the next winter—even with the people who had died in the third wave of flu, they still had more mouths to feed than food to fill them. The sickness had kept them from being efficient in gathering that food as well. The conscious divide between the Manor people and the travelers had started to fade, but everyone was stressed and tempers were frayed.

Mary yelled people into submission when they fought, shamed adults more than twice her age into doing their share of work with stubborn stares, and plotted out work parties to the closest farms with Mr. Roach. In the early mornings and late evenings, and sometimes in the middle of the day when she simply couldn’t stand to be around people any more, she hid in the garden.

Colin ordered people about and fought with Martin. He spent more and more of his time in the library with Miss Forrester, reading through books of philosophy about the nature of man and good government. Mary scoffed at the philosophy books but secretly stole some of the history books from him.

He was reading about feudal societies in the middle ages; how estates had worked when no one traveled much and everyone obeyed a single lord. How government worked when only the rich could afford to travel more than a day’s walk away. He was reading about ways the world had worked before and Mary knew he was still thinking about ways to make it work again.

Mary threw the books across the room. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a snake undulating away from the ill-used books. She ignored it.

She took all of blankets off of her bed and carried them out to the garden.

She made a nest there, under the leafy plum tree where three children had once done daily exercises to build up their muscles and become strong.
A few weeks later, Colin brought his own blankets out and added to her nest. The two of them slept curled together, warm and safe in the summer nights.

They still didn’t speak to each other during the day.

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Over the summer, the sickness started to fade. Fewer people caught sick and more of them survived.

The Manor began sending groups of people out to tend the farms, still well-protected by Martin’s men.

Mary felt as if there had been a giant, malevolent hand hovering over all of them, waiting to crash down and crush them all. Now, the weight of that hand was lifting away.

She started to dream again, even in the garden, and her dreams were still of India. But they were softer now.

She dreamed in Hindustani, her ayah’s lullaby threading through every scene. She dreamed of her mother dressing up for a party, smiling beautifully into her mirror. She dreamed of a small snake and knew that it was alive and that she was alive.

--

As fall came, Colin and Mary learned to live together again. Martin finally gave in and accepted Colin’s people as belonging to the Manor—which meant he bullied them through hunting lessons and made take turns at guard. And made sure they were as safe as he could keep them.

Colin took over arranging the parties going outside, although he relied on Mary to keep him abreast of what they needed to be looking for and bringing back. She spent more time with the cooks.
Mrs. Medlock and Miss Forrester began to create lists of things for people to do over the winter. Lessons and parties, games and crafts. They asked everyone to think of things they knew how to do—wood carving, storytelling, knitting, cooking—and made them promise to teach at least one other person how to do them.

Mary and Cook and Mr. Roach kept track of the pantry. They checked obsessively over every bit of food brought in, recorded it, and adjusted the rationing schedule they kept locked in the silver cabinet.

Their stockpile of food was already larger than last fall’s had been. They would still be hungry over the winter, but with luck no one would starve.

Mary wondered when she had started to believe in good luck again.

--

Dickon would always be associated with spring time to Mary. He was her childhood god of living things and new growth.

It felt odd and somehow wrong that he came home in the winter.

Many things felt wrong about his homecoming, even as Mary was filled with joy and relief to see him again.

Unlike Colin, Dickon came home alone. Dickon, who was everyone’s friend. Dickon, who had left with his father and older brother.

Dickon, cheerful, sweet Dickon came home without his smile, with shuttered eyes and a blank face worth of Mary’s best. With a limp and Colin’s old wariness of being looked at—and pitied.

As his brothers and sisters swarmed him, a great knot of a hug, Mary saw him looking around—for Martha and his mother, she was sure. His eyes met hers for a moment, then squeezed shut as he threw his arms around Elizabeth Ellen and as many of his siblings as he could reach.

He never asked about them.
The winter was cold and it was hungry; but they survived. There was joy and laughter as well as tears.

Dickon was silent and brooding, haunted by nightmares. Sometimes he clung to his siblings, some days he avoided them entirely.

Mary was contrary and stubborn and while that served her well sometimes, sometimes it meant she drove off people who wanted to help her. Some days she wanted to drive them off.

Colin was bright and overly cheerful, confident and arrogant and sure the world would do what he wanted it to do. Mary learned, as she had with Martin, to see it as a mask for the fear that lingered underneath.

During the day, Colin made his plans for the future; Mary took care of what she could in the present; Dickon fought to reconcile with the past.

At night, the three of them huddled in one great bed, whispering together about the garden and what they would plant in it when the spring came again.

Magic and laughter and fresh air couldn’t cure every illness. They couldn’t stop death. But they could make life worth living and give people a reason to fight for it.

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