

The
View
from
the
Very
Best
House
in
Town

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WALKER BOOKS



For my family



Asha

..... SPRING

Sometimes it seems that Donnybrooke is everywhere.

You're not supposed to be able to see any part of Donnybrooke—the most amazing house Asha has ever set foot in—from Sam's backyard. But from up in Sam's cherry tree, Asha spots a speck, black against the blue sky. Donnybrooke's creepy weather vane. It's the only bit of Donnybrooke she doesn't love, assuming you don't include the people who live there.

"I can see Donnybrooke," she calls down to Sam, the fluttering in her chest tight and familiar. She'd give anything to go back.

Sam doesn't reply. She can hear him, though, at the base of the tree playing Househaunt on her phone, chasing down a pack of buzzing, clicking monster-bugs.

"I can see it from here, Sam. Come up and look!" She catches herself. Sam never climbs trees. "Actually, sorry, don't."

The phone lets out a few short zaps and a long sizzle. Sam must have killed off her infestation of Bed-Thugs. She'll thank him later.

"Sam, Donnybrooke—"

"You can't see that house from here."

"I can, for real," she says.

"No, you can't."

"I—" starts Asha, but this time the wind interrupts her, sending the cherry blossom petals around her in a swirl. Separated, they're so pale, they're almost white—it's like she's in a snow globe with her world being turned upside down. And just for that moment, Sam is right. Donnybrooke is gone.




Donnybrooke

aka *The Grandest Mansion in Coreville
and Possibly the World*

First things first:

Of course Donnybrooke could see the girl. It's a basic law of nature: If she can see it, it can see her. And thanks to the wonderfully strong winds at the top of its hill, last week's storm cleared out a number of trees, not the least of which was one of those bloated oaks that had been practically breathing down its turrets. To be fair, that tree in particular was no worse than the rest of the poplars, pines, maples, and oaks that plague Donnybrooke, blocking the views of the finest residence in Coreville.

Donnybrooke couldn't see the boy she was talking to, though it heard him all too well. Ordinarily he'd hardly be worth mentioning in the same sentence as the girl, with her excellent architectural taste. But Donnybrooke has no choice



in light of the boy's egregious error. He referred to Donnybrooke as a . . . "house." *House?* As if Donnybrooke were built simply to be an ordinary shelter for an ordinary family?!

The correct term is *MANSION*.

Two syllables even sweeter than the sound of the wood chipper gobbling up a fallen tree.

One last time: *MANSION*.

Ahhh!



Sam

“We should play soc-cer,” says Sam as the petals settle on the ground. He says the last word like he might say *booger*, although Asha-soccer is the one kind of soccer he is willing to play.

As Asha climbs down the tree, Sam drags the goal back behind the azaleas, the best spot for hiding it. There’s no way his mom can see it from inside the house or even the patio. That was Asha’s idea, from years ago when his mom first decided that they should play soccer for at least thirty minutes of each playdate. One person would run around and kick while the other sat in the hidden goal pretending to be goalie, but really just spending the time thinking about whatever they wanted to think about. That was OK back then, but now that they have phones, goalie time is much better.

“You can be goalie first,” says Asha. “My attic has At-ticks. But no At-tick Fana-tick, so it should be OK.”

Sam takes her phone and runs to the goal. To make it fair, they have a rule that the goalie first has to help the person playing soccer with their Househaunt house, which means when Asha is goalie she builds extra wings and levels on Sam’s house because that part is boring and hard for everyone except Asha. When Sam is goalie, he fights Asha’s monsters because she hates fighting, especially bloodsuckers as big as her avatar. Of course that’s the best part of the game, but whatever, more fun for him.

He enters her Househaunt house and grabs a flaming torch from the stairway that leads up to the attic. Then he swings open the door. Sure enough, a troop of human-size ticks is ready to clamp onto him and suck. A few even try. But as soon as he points the torch at them, they retreat, and he backs them up toward an open window. One by one, they scurry out. Mission accomplished. If only the At-tick Fana-tick were so easy to defeat . . .

“Sam! Sam!”

His mom is out on the patio, yelling. At him. Sam drops Asha’s phone and bolts. His mom must have found them out. He searches his brain for some excuse that will let him avoid a lecture on how practicing soccer is for his own good, but before he can come up with anything, he’s at the back door.

“Come inside!” says his mom, her voice a little softer.

He does as she says, and she shuts the door behind them. Then she throws her arms around him, squeezing hard, and says, “We did it, Sam! We did it!”

As Sam frees himself from her grip, he realizes two things: Whatever his mom is talking about, it’s not soccer. And she is not mad. In fact, she’s the opposite.

“You got into Castleton, Sam! Castleton! And to think I was so worried. But you’re in!”

Sam’s chest tightens and lightens like a star is being born right inside it, like all the stress inside him is making something new and bright. Miraculous even, if you believed in miracles. Because Castleton Academy has picked him.

It’s not just that it’s the best school in town. It’s not just that it’s really hard to get into. It has its own planetarium. And its own flag with the Castleton coat of arms . . . And did he mention its own *planetarium*! He and Asha used to go on field trips there, and he’d see the kids with their green polo shirts lining up in the halls and wonder what it would be like to have Castleton decide you were good enough to be there every single day. Now he, Samuel J. Moss, is going to find out.

His mom is talking faster now and not entirely making sense. “We knew you could be Castleton material, but I’m just thrilled they saw it, too! You’re such a smart kid, but still—it’s very competitive, and with your challenges—”

Challenges? For a split-second the star feeling in Sam's chest dims, but then his mom says, "Anyway, none of that matters now because you're going there! After all our work, you're going! Do you realize how amazing this makes you?"

Being amazing isn't really the kind of thing that can be measured, nor is the awesomeness of being selected by a school with its own planetarium, but in this moment, Sam doesn't care. He's amazing, it's going to be awesome, and that's enough.

"Oh, Sammy. Let me show you the acceptance letter so you can see for yourself. It's up on my computer. This is going to open so many doors for you!"

Sam takes a look out the window before following his mom upstairs to the study. Asha's back in her tree, on the outside looking in.



Asha

Sam is gone a long time, long enough for Asha to get her phone, see that her house still has a few At-ticks, climb back up the cherry tree, and study the petals that have bunched in the crooks of its branches. She wishes that they actually were snowflakes; watching snow melt would be better than being stuck in a tree wondering when Sam will come back. She presses on the pattern in the wood where a branch was cut away, her fingerprint to the tree's. Finally she texts her big brother, Rohan, even though she's trying not to bug him all the time because he's at college, and her parents keep telling her that college is busy.

Sam went inside. And he's not coming back.

Nothing. Rohan is probably busy writing a paper or working on some computer project or doing whatever it is you do when there's only three and a half weeks left in the spring semester.

A message pops back up: **Time waits for no man.**

Argh! He's in one of his scholarly moods. He's probably rubbing that stupid, stubbly beard he's trying to grow as he types.

Stop it! she responds.

Sorry. :) Give it a few more minutes.

She knows Rohan is trying to be helpful, but he doesn't understand how long Sam's been gone. Should she walk home? It's kind of far, but she's done it before. She could text her mom or dad to come get her, but then they'll want to know what is wrong, and nothing is wrong, except that Sam isn't coming back out.

Asha takes one last look in the direction of Donnybrooke. Yes, it's definitely the weather vane. She can imagine the rest: The deck, so high up that it's almost as if you're looking at a 3-D map of town below. And along the roof and sides, skylights and windows of all shapes—round, oval, arched, square, and rectangular, narrow and wide. And inside, columns galore, some topped with scrolls, others with leaves, and a few with nothing at all. Most of the houses in town are just what you'd expect—ramblers with galley kitchens and first-floor master bedrooms; center-hall colonials with formal dining rooms and symmetric windows; split-levels, like her own, with short staircases and basement rec rooms. She likes them fine, of course—she likes all houses—but they're nothing compared to Donnybrooke. She wonders how it would feel today, if it had feelings. Would it be

celebrating that it was spring? Or, like her, would it be nervous about something?

Asha lowers herself down the tree. She squints at the back windows of Sam's house but can't see anyone. She runs to the patio door and knocks.

There's no reply. She knocks again, louder this time, and then forces herself to turn around, take five steps, and count to ten before knocking again. Before she finishes, the screen door creaks.

Sam's back. He steps toward her, then away, then toward her again. Butterflies move like that, in starts and stops, and Asha remembers why they used to scare her when she was little.

"What's wrong?" she asks before he gets too close.

He walks to the soccer ball and kicks it hard enough that it bounces off his fence.

"What's wrong?" she asks again.

"Nothing is wrong," he replies and runs over to where the ball landed.

"You're playing soccer. What's wrong?"

"I'm not. I just kicked the ball once. And I'm happy. That's it."

Sam sounds like her mom when she wants to keep a secret. Asha tries again. "I think my next Househaunt house might sort of look like Donnybrooke. If your game is set to difficult mode, there's a house you can pick that has turrets, but also dormer windows . . ." She knows she's told him this before, but at least

she's not asking him about the secret he's trying to keep, so he ought to appreciate it. "They both have spiral staircases, but in Donnybrooke it's in the back and in the Househaunt one I think it's in the front. There's also—"

"I'm going to go to Castleton Academy." Sam's voice is proud and stiff, like a pair of new dress shoes.

"What?!"

"Castleton Academy." This time he says it slowly, like it's the name of a foreign country he's reading off a map for the first time. Then he speeds up. "That's why my mom called me in. Because she just found out I was accepted. And I'm going to go."

"No!" Asha knows sometimes she hears things wrong. This has to be one of those times. "You're not."

"Yeah, I am. And it's the best school in Coreville. And it's got that planetarium!" Sam adds, which obviously Asha knows since they've attended three field trips there over the past five years and sat next to each other each time they watched a demonstration of what the sky over Coreville would look like that night.

"You can't go there." Asha's face is hot, and her head is muddled like when she's played too much Househaunt in the car. She shouldn't even have to say this. It's not just that he's her best friend, or her one friend in middle school, or the friend she's had the longest. It's not just that he keeps her from being alone now that Rohan's off at college. It's that they're the same.

And they're different from other kids, especially Castleton kids. She knows this the way she knows the tilt of her roof or the layout of her room.

"Why can't I go there?" says Sam, sounding like Sam again.

Asha bites her lip hard. Does he really not know? Her parents have drilled into her that she's not supposed to ask other kids about their diagnoses or differences, not even Sam, but surely he's autistic like her, right? They spent five years in speech together. They get each other. She's never needed to ask out loud because the answer was obvious. But at this moment she wonders if she was wrong. Or if she's somehow fallen behind.

"Why not?" he asks again.

How can Asha explain this to him without saying what she's not supposed to? She looks up to the sky. Clouds are gathering in the direction of Donnybrooke.

"Prestyn goes there," Asha finally says. The one girl lucky enough to live in that amazing house and mean enough to keep Asha out.

"So what?"

How can Sam say that? Asha has told him all about Prestyn at least a hundred times. About how awful she was that one time Asha visited Donnybrooke and how none of the neighborhood girls would play with Asha afterward. About how Prestyn and her friends used to giggle whenever they saw Asha at the park or

the pool or on a planetarium field trip, and when Asha would ask why, they'd just laugh louder. About how now Prestyn ignores her, but in a way that feels even worse than the laughing ever did.

"I'm talking about Prestyn *Donaldson*."

"I know. You always talk about her."

"She's Prestyn the—"

"I don't care about her or her house."

What is going on with Sam? He doesn't even finish their joke. It's like he's pulling away on purpose. Asha is flooded with the urge to yank him back and shake him until he understands.

"We're not like her. We're not." She points at him hard and accidentally pokes his chest. She instantly regrets it. But before she can apologize, Sam picks up the soccer ball and runs back inside his house.

"You're wrong! And I'm going to Castleton just like her," he calls before the wind slams the door shut behind him.

More petals swirl through the air, clouding Asha's view. Her world is spinning again, but this time she doesn't feel like she's in a snow globe. She just feels sick.



Donnybrooke

The MANSION That Simply Requests That
You Use the Proper Terminology

To be clear, the boy is as similar to Prestyn as a simple rambler is to Donnybrooke. In fairness, no child can truly compare to her, just like no other home can compare to Donnybrooke. That's the whole point of being the best. You're in a class by yourself.

And again, Donnybrooke is a MANSION. If you must call it a house, then, like Mrs. Donaldson, please be sure to affix the term *dream* beforehand, as in *dream house*.



Sam

..... SUMMER

Now that it's the end of August, Sam can say for sure: This has been a seriously weird summer. Even though he was smart enough to get into Castleton in the first place, his mom made him get tutoring in reading comprehension and writing, which he hadn't needed in two years. She kept taking him shopping for uniform clothes: one trip for the green polos, V-neck sweaters, and blazers with the school coat of arms on the chest, and then four more for khaki shorts and pants that were "stylish enough for Castleton," according to his mom, but also comfortable enough for Sam to make it through the day. And his mom made him get his hair cut twice—three times if you count from when he got the acceptance last spring. His mom even tried to sign him up for soccer camp, so he'd be ready for the after-school soccer club, but thankfully, it conflicted with his tutoring. Instead his mom

had him start running for exercise, which he worried would feel just like soccer but without the ball and other kids. But maybe even soccer wouldn't feel like soccer without that stuff because the running is just fine.

And then, in August, he took a vacation that was more than fine. The best ever, actually. For his birthday, his parents took him to visit not one, not two, not three, but four different planetariums, including the Hayden Planetarium in New York City. Every time the stars appeared on the domed ceiling above him, his chest filled with the joy that comes from sitting under a shelter that can display the visible universe. Every movie he watched reminded him that the true heroes in space aren't just the astronauts, but also the physicists and engineers who do all the work behind the scenes. Work he can do one day, especially now that he's going to such a good school. At the Hayden Planetarium, Sam even met an astrophysicist with a comet named after him. The whole drive home, Sam thought about what it would be like to have an object with your name whizzing through space.

The whole thing was pretty weird for a family vacation, but good weird. His parents were happier than ever and talked with him about every space fact and never made him feel like he should be thinking of something else. It was awesome-weird, actually.

The weirdest summer thing of all, though, was yesterday when that reporter from the *Coreville Gazette* came over. At first, Sam thought it was pretty cool that someone wanted to write an article about him—his mom told him that not many kids his age were featured in the newspaper. But then the reporter lady came in wearing these enormous earrings that looked like a model of the solar system if you thought all the planets' orbits were circular and had no sense of scale. She only talked to his mom, like he wasn't even there, asking all sorts of questions about what Sam was like when he was little, and his mom started crying and saying, "Happy tears, happy tears," which was really awkward, so he went upstairs halfway through to play Househaunt on his phone.

But today his mom has left for a weekend away with some of her mom friends, and Sam is ready for a normal day. His dad has taken him to the park—his dad always takes him to the park when his mom is away, no matter how many times Sam says he's fine just staying at home—but at least his dad doesn't bug him to play soccer. He lets Sam do what Sam wants, and Sam lets his dad do what he wants, which is to get out his phone and check his email. Sam's dad likes his email as much as Sam likes space. Maybe more, actually.

They get out of the car, and Sam starts running on the path that leads toward the playground and tennis courts, and away

from the soccer fields. He hits his stride quickly, and his footsteps fall into a satisfying beat. He's so focused on his rhythm that he's almost at the swings when he realizes he's a few feet away from someone he knows.

Asha.

Her back is to him, her long black ponytail flying out behind her as she swings high, not letting her feet skim the ground. He goes still. He hasn't seen her since the last day of school, when she apologized for saying he didn't belong at Castleton. That was two months ago—it's probably their longest time apart since they met. He did ask his mom about seeing her a few times, but she always said they had too much to do or Asha had activities or relatives in town, and besides, he'd be meeting Castleton kids once school started. It was a little weird because usually his mom made sure he had plans with Asha every couple of weeks, but it's also true that this summer, getting ready for Castleton, has felt busier than any summer he can remember.

Asha's feet crunch to a stop, and she spins around in her swing.

"Sam!" she says cheerily, like she just saw him last week. Whatever weirdness there was about Castleton is gone.

He plops down next to her. "Hi, Asha."

"Have you been under your planetarium umbrella much?"

Sam grins. "A few times." Asha gave him the planetarium umbrella as a present three birthdays ago. He was a little confused

when he unwrapped it and found a boring, black umbrella large enough to shelter his whole family. But then he popped it open and understood. She'd decorated the inside with drops of glow-in-the-dark paint, and she'd clearly followed a star map of the Northern Hemisphere because all the constellations lined up just as they might in real life. It's true that it's not the same as the real planetariums his parents took him to, but it's also true that you can't keep a real planetarium in your bedroom closet to go under whenever you choose.

"Are you nervous about school starting?" he blurts. "Do you feel ready?"

"I'm always nervous to start school. Always."

"But we were at Sullivan last year. It's not even going to be new for you."

"Every year is different and you don't know how it's going to be different until you're in it. So, I'm nervous." She turns around and around in her swing so the chains crisscross.

"Yeah, I am, too," says Sam as she spins herself out. It's a relief to admit it out loud.

Asha reaches in her pocket and pulls out her phone. "Do you want to trade?" she asks.

Within seconds, they've opened up each other's Househaunt houses. They're both at the point where they're trying to design the inside of their houses. They have to be careful because in this

game every time you make a mistake—say, put in a room that has sunlight shining down from the ceiling in a house with no skylights—you sprout monster-bugs. The bigger your mistake, the mightier the monsters.

After you finish your original house, you can put on additions with more and more rooms. It's not just that having a big house is cool; it's also that each room contains hidden weapons to add to your arsenal—like salt cartons or silver knives—heck, even skylights can come in handy when you're fighting off Vampire-Chefs on a sunny day. Asha once built Sam a basement laundry room, which might sound boring, but it not only fried Bed-Thugs in the dryer, it also connected to a laundry chute, which was a very useful escape route.

Asha basically never makes design mistakes, so she would never need him if that's all there were to Househaunt. But it's not. Once you build your house, you have to maintain it and keep it clean. Just like a real house collects all sorts of dirt and dust, a Househaunt house collects all sorts of monster-bugs, and the longer you wait, the worse they get. Rohan says that's actually just the game makers' way of making sure you play more often, which is kind of evil but also pretty smart. Anyway, Sam is glad they built the game that way because it gives him something to be good at, too. In fact, Rohan told him he was “a monster-killing genius” when he first taught them how to play, and it is kind of

true. So far, Sam has been able to beat every kind of monster except the At-tick Fana-tick. Even Rohan, who has been playing for years longer, can't kill it.

“Do you want a finished attic?” says Asha. “I'll be really careful.”

The risk with an attic is that if you mess up badly enough, it can sprout the At-tick Fana-tick. Everyone hates it because it's one of the only ways you lose your entire house and all your lives and have to start over. Basically, it's as bad as having your house condemned. But for Sam, it's even worse because sometimes when you're fighting the At-tick Fana-tick, it takes you up on top of the roof, spins you around until you're a blur, and flings you through the air. It's like it's designed to remind Sam of how much he hates heights. And who wants to be reminded of their worst fear? No one, that's who.

But as he investigates the perfectly-designed attic in Asha's house and finds a set of fire extinguishers, he reconsiders. Finished attics always have the most unusual weapons hidden in them and Asha would build his flawlessly. And that could buy him extra time to figure out how to defeat the At-tick Fana-tick once and for all—and get the extra lives and everything else that goes along with that. As he weighs the risks, he spots a couple of Screech-Leeches in Asha's pipes. While he searches for a box of salt, an icky shape-shifting bug called a Witch-One emerges

from the vents. Luckily Sam is next to a fire extinguisher, which he unloads on it. Asha glances over.

“Ooo—nice!” she squeals as the Witch-One evaporates.

Sam grins. It was a nice move, and it gives him time to find the salt, fill up the fire extinguisher with it, and give a Leech a solid blast. As it shrivels with a screech and a slurp, Sam realizes that sitting here in the sun with Asha, playing their favorite game, he’s having the best time he’s had all summer, aside from his trip to the planetariums. As Sam reloads with more salt, his dad’s blindingly white sneakers stop in front of the swings.

“Well, hello there, Asha,” he says. “I hope you’ve had a nice summer.”

“I have, thank you.”

Sam kills the other Screech-Leech and thinks a little more about the finished attic. He’s leaning toward having her build it. Asha’s attic makes her house way cooler and more powerful than his.

“Sam, it looks like there’s a surprise for you!” says his dad.

Sam stiffens in his swing. He’s not a fan of surprises.

“Your mom just forwarded me an email. You have a party tonight!”

“Party!” says Asha

“Party?” says Sam. Who invited him to a party?

Sam’s dad leans back, squints at the screen, and reads, “The

incoming seventh-grade class of Castleton Academy is invited to a footloose and fancy-free evening to kick off the school year. Please join us at seven p.m.’ There’s a note from the host apologizing for sending this so late. She just got our email address.”

A Castleton party. Tonight. He feels his insides shrink like the Screech-Leech he just decimated.

“You said we’d go to Fastburger for dinner,” says Sam.

“We can go beforehand,” says his dad. “Mom wants you to go to this thing.”

Sam’s mom loves parties. He remembers his mom taking him to his neighbor Connor’s indoor soccer birthday parties at the Coreville Sportsplex. He was invited twice, and both years tried to wait it out in the hall, even though it smelled like dirty socks and snack bar grease. His mom wouldn’t let him leave before the cake was cut.

Sam turns away from his dad, and the chains of his swing lock together. He knows this party won’t involve soccer or any other sport, but he still doesn’t want to go. It was not in the plan. And it’s with Castleton kids. It’s not that he hasn’t met anyone there. Before he got in, he had an admissions visit where he sat in a class with half the kids in his grade, and even saw a show in the planetarium with them. He doesn’t need to go tonight.

“Look, Sam,” says his dad, sounding too cheerful, “it says, ‘Please feel free to bring a guest.’ You can bring Asha.”

“Really?” asks Asha.

“If it’s OK with your parents,” says Sam’s dad before Sam can answer.

“They’re at a wedding out of town. Rohan’s in charge.” She pops out of her swing and runs toward the tennis courts.

“Rohan’s here?” exclaims Sam, following her. Sam doesn’t want to go to this party, but he does want to see Rohan. Rohan who taught him Househaunt and talks to him about astronomy and who he hasn’t seen since last summer. Sam has always thought life would be so much easier if he had a big brother like Rohan to show him the ropes.

When Sam gets to the courts, Asha is already talking to Rohan, who is not quite as tall as Sam remembers and, it appears, is trying to grow a beard. Rohan rubs his fuzzy chin. The first thing Sam hears him say is, “Socialization is a critical activity across species.”

Sam has no idea what that means.

Apparently neither does Asha. “Rohan! I told you to stop talking like that.”

“You can go to the party if Sam’s dad can drive.”

“Yes!” Asha jumps up and down.

To Sam’s surprise, the knot in his stomach loosens. Maybe with Asha there, it’ll be kind of like it is here at the park except inside. Maybe he won’t have to try to fit in with the other kids or

wonder whether he's really Castleton material. Maybe the two of them can find a quiet corner and play Househaunt. Maybe she'll build him that attic and he'll fight off her monsters and together they'll ignore the rest of the party. That could be fun.

Rohan grins at Sam and puts his hand to the fence for a high five. "You ready for a party, Sam, my friend?"


Sam presses his hand against Rohan's and nods. He hopes he is. Because ready or not, it's coming.



Donnybrooke

*the MANSION and the Most Sought-After
Site for a Party in Coreville*

This evening's festivities will be hosted by Donnybrooke, the extraordinary residence of the Donaldson family: Mr. Dexter Andrews Donaldson, Mrs. Brooke Allen Donaldson, and their lovely daughter, Prestyn Arabella Donaldson. Mr. Donaldson, who considers himself something of an expert in architecture, as well as most other things, likes to say, "The most important thing about a house is what it communicates to the outside world." And everything about Donnybrooke says it's the best. As the largest home sitting at the highest point in Coreville, it has three chimneys, four turrets, a five-car garage, ten types of windows, a swimming pool, an elevator, a roof deck, and wrought iron gates decorated with a one-of-a-kind D&B crest, and it is surrounded by enough trees to keep a paper mill going for a decade.



In the interest of full disclosure, were you to look at Donnybrooke's deed, you would find that it's technically called 10001 Hunt Place, though you'd have to be coarse as a weed to call it *that*. And it doesn't actually have a brook running through it. Rather, it was named after its refined owners, who recognized its uniqueness by naming it after themselves even before the marble was put down in the foyer. After all, it's the family that makes the mansion, and the mansion that makes the family. Together, they're in a class by themselves.


Admittedly, at times, being the best can be a touch lonely. But there's nothing like some festivities to make it all worthwhile. The kind of party where fairy lights are strung along the roof deck, counters are heavy with bowls of fizzy punch and platters of endless snacks, and a temporary dance floor and disco ball grace the living room. The kind of party where the rooms overflow with guests who drip with awe and jealousy. The kind of party that makes Donnybrooke feel even more loved than all the ordinary homes in town put together. It's been too long since that's happened.

Too long for the Donaldsons, too. And they could undoubtedly use the boost as much as their mansion. These days, they're out of sync: Mr. Donaldson has more excuses to be away, Mrs. Donaldson hasn't been herself, and Prestyn hardly talks to either of them. Donnybrooke has seen what can

happen to houses when their families fall apart: They're sold to *an entirely different family*. And the house is never quite the same after that. But that's not going to happen here, not now. Because the Donaldsons are about to have a night to remind them of who they've always been and must always be: the finest family in the finest home in Coreville.

To think Prestyn made such a fuss about having this party in the first place, saying she was sick of everyone—her classmates, her friends, her parents (please note, her mansion was not on the list). Mrs. Donaldson intervened with some of her classic pearls of wisdom: “You don't have a party because you want to be with them, you have a party so they'll want to be with you” and “Just because you're pretty doesn't mean you get to stop trying.” When that didn't work, she switched tacks: “I wish I'd been lucky enough to have a mom who wanted to throw me parties like this.” But Prestyn didn't budge one bit until Mrs. Donaldson finally said, “Fine, if you want to be like Asha Wood down the hill, I can't help you.”

Such a perplexing statement in light of Asha's excellent architectural taste. Her awe when she looks at Donnybrooke or speaks of it—it's clear she appreciates the mansion more than anyone else, even when it's not dressed to impress. But perhaps Mrs. Donaldson is still a bit sore from that last time she was over, all those years ago. Anyway, what's important

A decorative column on the left side of the page, featuring a capital with a floral pattern and a shaft with vertical fluting.

is that the party is happening: Prestyn relented, Mr. Donaldson cleared his schedule, and Mrs. Donaldson sent out the invites. And now they'll all remember how much they need one another. And how much they need their dream house. It's going to be perfect.

But wait! Who's this coming up the drive? Is she finally allowed back? It has been too long since she's visited. Far too long. And yet Donnybrooke didn't hear a single word about her coming. Quite the opposite. Surely it would know if the Donaldsons were expecting *her*.

Oh, dear. This could put a wrench in the works.