

## **LITTLE MARY, THE SWITCHER**

Little Mary was now 6 years old, getting bigger everyday. Mommy and Daddy had said something about a divorce, whatever that is. Mary noticed Mommy and Daddy had a hurt look, like a real bad stomachache or something. Mary checked her own tummy and noticed it didn't feel too good either. Then Daddy moved to a condo, whatever that is. Everything seemed different. The world just didn't feel the same anymore. Nothing seemed to be solid.

But Mary knew what to do. It is what she always did whenever there was any kind of trouble. She had felt ever since she was a baby that she was the love in the family. The bigger the trouble, the more Mommy and Daddy loved her, and the more she loved them. Love is great medicine for stomachaches and all sorts of hurts. So Mary knew her job now. She would love Mommy and Daddy with all her might. "Who knows," she thought, "if I love strong enough maybe Mommy and Daddy will love each other and get back together."

Then one day after kite flying with Daddy, she was in the back seat of the car on the way back to Mommy's. She loved kite flying and had had a wonderful day with Daddy. All of a sudden she got the urge to fly one more kite. "Daddy," she said, "do you still love Mommy?" Daddy did one of those deep breath things, and she thought she heard a gulp. Then Daddy said, in not his regular kite-flying voice, "Well no, sweetheart, Daddy and Mommy don't love each other anymore. That's why we are having a divorce." Mary didn't like that answer. It sort of hurt, and Daddy didn't sound too good either. Mary knew what to do: time to show some love. She waited for a few moments for her tummy to settle and her heart to gear up. Then she asked, "Daddy, would you like me to live with you?" Daddy sure wasn't answering questions as fast as he usually did. Finally Daddy said, "Of course, pumpkin, I would love for you to live with me. I will always be your Daddy. But Mommy and I have decided that you will live at Mommy's and we will share you." Mary knew kite flying was over for that day. She noticed they were just passing McDonald's and she got Daddy to drive through for some fries.

The very next day, Mary was in the back seat of Mommy's car. They were going shopping. Mary had been a bit cranky since leaving Daddy the evening before. She didn't like her bath that evening, and she didn't like what Mommy fixed for breakfast. She complained to Mommy that her feet were hurting from kite flying, because Daddy made her run too much. And the kites wouldn't fly. They kept crashing. Kite flying was no fun. Then Mary looked out of the car window and saw they were passing McDonald's. She blurted out what was on her mind. "Mommy, Daddy said he hates you." Mommy put both hands on the steering wheel and stiffened up, like she was getting ready for an accident. Then the other thing popped into Mary's mind. "Daddy wants me to live with him," she said. Mommy seemed quiet for a few moments, and then asked Mary how her sore feet were feeling. When they got to the toy store, Mary did not go anywhere near the kite section. She headed for the dolls. And she thought maybe she needed a new pair of runners.

The very next day, Daddy's lawyer got papers from Mommy's lawyer. Mommy thought it best Mary not see Daddy quite as much.

Mary kept going back and forth between Mommy and Daddy, but it didn't feel the same. She noticed they never smiled at each other or talked to each other. She decided that stirring the pot and flying kites were not good ideas. She went back to the one thing she was good at—loving. It wasn't easy anymore. She had found she couldn't love Mommy and Daddy at the same time. She had to take turns. And she had to be careful what she said. She found it was easiest if she just forgot all about Daddy when she was with Mommy, and vice versa. The transfers were a very hard time. Mary dreaded them. It was so hard to change her heart and her love from one to the other. She always looked hopefully for a smile between her parents. But this never happened. They hardly looked at each other, and they spoke little. They smiled only at her, never at each other. When Daddy got her a pet hamster, she named it Smiley.

No one noticed it, not Mommy or Daddy or even Mary. But something was happening to Mary's memory. Her memory started to change the same as her heart did, as she went back and forth between her tense, unsmiling parents. When she was with Mommy, she never could remember all the fun she had with Daddy, kite flying, wrestling, going to the zoo and McDonald's. All she could remember with Mommy was her sore feet, or how her arm got twisted and her hair pulled when wrestling, or how cold the zoo was, and the hot fries burnt her tongue. When she was with Daddy, she couldn't remember what good times she had with grandma, or how nice it felt when Mommy made her favorite cookies, or did her hair, or tucked her in at night. All she could remember at Daddy's was when Mommy yelled at her, and grandma said he was mean. (Well, she wasn't sure grandma actually said that, but it sure felt that way.)

Mary used to love the telephone. She learned to dial when she was only five. Now she hated the phone. Each time it rang, it jolted her, or gave her a little pain in the tummy. Sometimes Mommy and Daddy would talk to friends on the phone and say bad things about each other. This hurt Mary's heart and confused her. Sometimes it was Mommy or Daddy who called. Mary could tell because the one who answered the phone got tense, stopped smiling, and didn't say much. Unless it got to be an argument. When the call was for Mary, she didn't know what to do or what to say. She hadn't had time to change her heart and her memory. She tried to avoid going on the phone. When she did, she didn't say much. Mommy and Daddy got more and more tense with each other. Mary knew in her heart that it had to do with her.

One day Mommy explained that the judge, whoever he is, wanted everyone to go see the divorce doctor. The divorce doctor was going to see how Mary was doing, what she was feeling, and then help Mommy and Daddy find the best way to share her. Mary felt something heavy was going on, like when there is a big secret and it is bad.

The divorce doctor was nice enough, but Mary was taking no chances. She was careful, especially when he asked questions about Mommy or Daddy. But he talked about the family differently from everyone else. He seemed to respect both Mommy and Daddy. Most of all, he seemed to know what it was like to be in the middle, to go back and forth, and to have your heart and memory change. He smiled a lot. Mary felt he could understand. After awhile, she was having great talks with him, and found herself actually putting her confusing feelings into words. Most of all, the doctor seemed to know what Mommy and Daddy didn't know—that her heart and memories actually changed as she went back and forth.

And so, when the divorce doctor asked Mary how she did it, how she managed to go back and forth and change her heart, she told him the secret game she had invented. She said, "It is simple. I go end to end." "End to end?" the doctor asked. "Yeah," Mary explained, "Like those games they play on television—basketball or football. There are poles at each end. First you play at one end and then you play at the other end. You just switch." "Switch?" the doctor asked. "Yep," Mary said, running from one side of the office to the other. "You switch sides. You go back and forth. First one side, one pole, then the other." "But how do you do it?" asked the doctor. "You mean you change uniforms or something?" "No, silly," said Mary. "You don't change clothes till you have already switched sides. You switch in your heart. Nobody can see it. But I can feel it." Mary put her finger on her heart. "Oh," said the doctor, "I see. You are a switcher." "You got that right," Mary replied, pleased that someone finally seemed to understand. "I see," said the doctor, "you are a very smart little girl. So tell me, when do you switch?" Mary did not hesitate. "That's easy, McDonald's." "McDonald's?" puzzled the doctor. "Yep. There's a McDonald's right between Mommy's house and Daddy's house. I keep my eyes open and when we pass the McDonald's, my heart starts to switch. By the time I get to the house, it is all done. And I am ready for the other end, the other pole."

The divorce doctor went on to ask Mary about her memory changing. She hadn't really been aware of this or thought about it. It was a bit awkward, maybe a little embarrassing, for Mary to talk about this. She was afraid someone would think she had been lying. Mommy and Daddy were always arguing about truth and lies. But the doctor seemed to know it was about memories and feelings really changing, about switching, and not about lying. Mary felt a huge burden leave her when this was understood and put into words.

Mary and the divorce doctor agreed that the end-to-end game, the switching, would not be necessary if Mommy and Daddy could smile at each other, be friendly and nice, and talk to each other.