

1.

Late August. 1980.

'Houses, houses, we lodge in such husks!
inhabit such promises...'

Gill's fingers curled over the wooden handle of the old bell-pull, like four young animals snuggling into their burrow. Reaching for the handle was instinctive; it was proof that she had yet to accept change. There was nobody to hear the bell at the end of its wire, deep within Ramsons. From now on, no one would exclaim with delight at Gill's arrival, wipe flour from her hands, hurry down the stone passageway. Gill must let herself in. She unhooked her fingers and stretched the back pocket of her jeans to release the key, which was large enough to seem a pantomime prop and which had been branding her left buttock throughout the journey from Bristol to Lincolnshire.

Behind Gill an eager queue had formed. Helpers, family, friends, sheltered from bright sunlight by the arch of box hedging that lined the front path. Beyond them, in the top corner of the village square, was the convoy of vehicles that held everything the Murphy family possessed. Gill raised the key in the air, "I feel like Saint Peter," she said, but each member of the queue had his or her reasons not to respond. Seb, Gill's husband, who was carrying their daughter, Rosie, was telling an inattentive audience that there ought to be a blue plaque over the door. He had an actor's reverence for fame. "Gill's great-granddad was one of this country's most celebrated theatrical architects," he boasted on his wife's behalf. Bella, Gill's closest friend, was stroking her proudly pregnant belly. Others were gazing hopefully at the pub across the road, or taking in the impressive façade of Ramsons, a house that had previously been mere fable to them.

Gillian Murphy suspected their arrival was being noted; watched by overt and by hidden eyes. Not a decent set of wheels between this lot, that's what the locals would be thinking. An old Volkswagen camper, one dirty Transit van and a Morris Minor in need of renovation. Typical

modern scruffs, that's how they'd seem to the inhabitants of Staunley. Women in tie-dyed cottons, sporting long skirts and loose morals. Men with no collars to their shirts. The Great Unwashed. Staunley was no place for their kind, Gill imagined them mumbling, no matter if some of them were related to the Durrys.

The ornate key had been sent to Gill's mother; posted special delivery by Great-Aunt Tilly's solicitor. A baffling note had been enclosed with the key, one that hinted at communications to follow - instructions, possibly, for whoever became resident at Ramsons? Although Gill was doing her mother a favour by moving in to the family home, the key had been handed over with poorly disguised reluctance and a list of 'don'ts' that had made Gill want to abandon the move and head, instead, for some seriously remote hills. Now, Gill felt unsteady as she slotted the key in the lock. Due to yesterday's rain, the box hedging smelt of cats' pee, as it habitually did when refreshed. Her audience unnerved her. And the future, beyond the solid door, couldn't have been more uncertain. Ten years ago, she'd have been welcomed by Great-Aunt Flora, stout and over-excited, bearing pots of China tea. Only last summer, Tilly had put on an old silk dress to greet her. Today there wouldn't be so much as a small dog to hurtle down the passage and nip at Gill's flip-flops.

Before she pushed the door open, Gill turned and gave Seb a smile. Holding a damp, sleeping Rosie in his arms, he met Gill's eyes over the top of the child's head. His returning smile encompassed the house, the situation and their other child, little Adam, who was screwing up his nose at the smelly hedge.

As Gill stepped inside, one of the helpers leaned forward and tugged at the bell-pull. From a distance, came a faint ringing, eerie as the bell of a ship lost in fog. Gill spun round to glare at a man named Marty, whose face was only inches from her own. She could smell the spaces between his teeth, she could have counted his pale eyelashes. Marty was one of Seb's hangers-on, a man who'd invited himself to partake in Gill's immediate family: well, he wasn't having any of this branch, he wasn't insinuating himself into the ways of the Durrys. She said, "Don't," to him, a sulky command, straight from her childhood.

Once inside the cool hallway, Gill bent to gather post from the flagstone floor. Junk mail, mostly - an irritating new phenomenon that was no respecter of trees, or in this case, of death. The entrance hall

to Ramsons was lined with glass cupboards in which the aunts had always kept their jams and pickles. Having fermented, these preserves now scented the air with strawberries, plums, vinegar and decay. “Welcome to the home that time forgot,” Gill joked to those who had come to help: but the confrontation with Marty had given her voice an unwelcoming edge. Her companions blinked and sniffed, trying to adjust. A bluebottle wove through the invasion of people, escaping the house only to be imprisoned by the heavy hedging.

Seb moved down the passageway and lowered Rosie to the floor. The little girl groaned, snuggled against her father’s legs. Gill noted that Seb was standing directly under Cedric, the plaster cherub who hung, in a cheery, eternal freeze-frame, over the wide front stairs. Cedric’s plump right cheek was still tinged with pink where Gill, as a child perched on her older sister’s shoulders, had once smeared him with redcurrants.

“It may seem sacrilegious,” Seb whispered to his wife, “but we have to make room for our stuff, somehow.” Gill nodded: of course. They must unload their tatty chairs, their stained sofa. The bunk beds must be installed in Aunty Flora’s lilac bedroom. Their array of discoloured beach towels had to be stacked in the world’s prettiest bathroom. They’d brought these possessions, paid good money to transport them across the country. Undoubtedly they must re-home them.

“Just give me half an hour,” she begged. “Take the kids outside, show off the garden. You can pick up fallen fruit, or something. Would you?” Sure, Seb nodded; he seemed to understand. But could he? How could Seb, who’d seen Ramsons only once before, on a flying visit during which they scoffed cakes, their behinds barely touching chairs, how might he be expected to even guess the way Gill felt? Somewhere, probably, there’d be a place that was special to Seb. She couldn’t remember having discussed this. It might be a field or a garden shed - but it must exist. How would Seb like it if he were asked to more than share his personal space? To unload on to his prime memories the junk that accompanies couples with young children?

In another life, before having babies, Gill had been a photographer. Instinctively, she headed for a photograph, knowing it would help to ground and reassure her. Suspended over the breakfast-room fireplace, she encountered the entire clan. The Durrays: a study in sepia. A family headed by Edward, the famous architect whose speciality was theatres

and music halls. Having once posed for this portrait, Gill's ancestors existed forever in a Spalding photographer's version of Egypt. The adults perched on elaborate winged chairs. Their children gathered round them under potted palm trees. Jethro, son and heir, stood behind his father, while the daughters were positioned according to height. Behind this group, screens depicted the dessert of a Lincolnshire man's imagination, a landscape overrun with pyramids, where plagues of slaves crawled the earth, each with his burden of stone. Flora, the eldest but not the tallest daughter, appeared to bear the full weight of one pyramid on her shoulders. The point of this architectural marvel adorned the top of her head, a stone pixie hat above a plain, round face that, thanks to the click of a lens, smiled spryly across the years.

Having studied all the Durry girls, Gill ultimately singled out her grandmother, Evangelina. Although Evangelina's temperament had been far from heavenly, she had possessed a face to match her angelic name. Having heard repeatedly of her grandmother's crowning glory and having been obliged to feel dreary simply for not inheriting this resplendence, Gill couldn't help but colour in the red-gold hair of this favourite daughter. In fact, as she stared harder, Gill would have sworn Evangelina's tresses broke through the sepia tones, gilding the photograph with one brilliant spill of colour.

Gill hadn't touched a camera, professionally, for years: but in her allotted half an hour, as she wandered from room to room, she collected an album of images. This corner had to be fixed in memory, precisely as it was. That sideboard must be captured forever, with its dulled decanters full of ancient sherry, its sewing baskets, doilies, sticky biscuit tins. It's dust. A monument to those who defied change and worshipped thrift.

It was the purity of Ramsons that defeated Gill. Decades of progress passed this house by. There was no fridge, not a hint of stainless steel or chipboard anywhere. No storage heaters spoilt the lines of floral bedrooms. The bathroom, a converted back bedroom, had a temporary air. On the tops of old dressing tables china bowls and jugs still resided: Ramsons had no faith in the reliability of modern plumbing.

Yes, it was appealing. Beautiful. Mahogany, lace, damask and velvet. Delightful to behold and lovely to the touch. Old, dear, unsullied. And all of it, every last curtain, each fluffy feather pillow, on the point of collapse. Gill could see that; she smelt the impending decay, sensed

that she stood in the exact moment when change, which had waited patiently, must come.

Even without their intrusion, had they stayed in Bristol and left Ramsons alone, this would have been the day when things here began to rot. Was it a force, or the lack of any energy whatsoever, that Gill experienced? It was the slowest, smallest of movements: a sigh. A beat in time. It was pods bursting, silently. Eggs hatching in dark corners.

In Tilly's bedroom, Gill cried quietly for loss in its many guises. She pulled one of Tilly's handkerchiefs from a lavender seeded drawer and blew her nose against the inevitability of change. "Sorry," she told her deceased Great Aunt. "I'll open a window, let the sun in." Talking to Tilly didn't seem the least eccentric; the old woman was there, in the cupboards and the papier-mâché boxes, in the almost imperceptible holes that worms were chewing throughout. On her way to the window, Gill bumped into a white enamel bucket resting at the foot of the bed. It was a lidded bucket with a thin blue rim and a wooden handle. The lid, jolted by Gill, slid off to expose the contents. A smell escaped. Gill's grief turned instantly to tears of mephitic. The overpowering stench filled the room, sent Gill stumbling to the window, gave her arms super strength with which to shove a pane upwards.

Fresh air cleared her head. It didn't take a genius to work out what was in the bucket. For as long as anybody could remember, Tilly suffered from what was euphemistically referred to as a bad tummy. She'd lived on saucerfuls of grated apple. Presumably, Tilly had been taken short on the night of her death; and the nearest receptacle had been that bucket. "No worries," Gill said aloud, as if the spirits of those who would have fretted over such things were close by, "I'll deal with it."

Not straight away, though. Some actions need to be taken under cover of darkness. Right then, Gill wanted to find something bright, comforting. A familiar object she could call her own. She wasn't materialistic, the prospect of ownership didn't much excite her. Ramsons had been left to Gill's mother, June; but the contents were to be divided between four women. Along with June and Gill, her sisters, Sarah and Kate, were to have their share of this not inconsiderable hoard of antiques. The arrangement was fine by Gill: she had only one

claim to stake.

When other voices sounded nearby, Gill hid. Time enough to socialize later. She crept down the back stairs, heading for the drawing room where her treasure waited. The place was in darkness, the brocade curtains having been closed since Tilly died. Gill let in the light, shielded her eyes against the sun and the powder that danced free in its path. She could smell dog. Tilly's last hound, a hairy Pomeranian called Tricksey, must have used the Turkish rugs as toilets. A mystery surrounded Tricksey, who had been alive and well right up to Tilly's death but had disappeared by the time the family arrived for the funeral.

There was a damp feel to the room, as if the green wallpaper was actually moss and the floor was becoming compost. The impressive furniture was caked with thick dust. On the marble mantelpiece plants were so long dead that they resembled piles of tea-leaves. None of that bothered Gill unduly; she had her mind set on making music.

From faded photographs and paintings, her ancestors watched as Gill patted the stool and sat at the piano. It was an upright, wooden framed instrument, made of walnut, decorated by gilt candlesticks and an ornate trellis that covered a tapestry whose reds and blues had dimmed to mauves. Gill stroked the lid, coating her fingers with the time since the piano had last been played. When revealed, the keys were creamy: Gill's hands hovered over them, reverently. They were the essence of legend, the clue to her ideal of motherhood.

On summer nights, when Gill and her sisters had been staying at Ramsons, Great-Aunt Flora would tell the little girls stories of the hours spent in this room, around this piano. Tilly had played well, if a bit reservedly. But it had been Elizabeth Durry, a matriarch reportedly grim as any fairy-tale character, who'd played the Durry family into life. According to her surviving daughters, Elizabeth had been strict, demanding: a despot to her children at all times except when she sat here, on this stool. Then, apparently, she had been transformed; transported by sheer joy. And in the place she inhabited when she played, even her least favourite children had felt themselves accepted; almost loved.

Gill, who could hardly play, promised she would learn. She envisaged evenings to come: she would be the musician and Adam and Rosie the dancers. They'd polka up and down this grand room while

Gill did what mothers should - made music to feed their souls. There was a song about the moon, Tilly had taught it to Gill long ago. It had a light, lilting melody. With her right hand, Gill pressed middle C. Nothing happened. The next note was also mute. And the next. Gill explored further, a spider and an elephant, sometimes tripping over and sometimes thumping notes of cream, notes of black. Occasional keys made a sad sound, muffled as gagged singers; but most were horribly silent.

“Beautiful piano.” It was Bella who spoke, silencing the thuds in Gill’s head. Bella was pregnant for the first time. Her right hand, usually employed in fondling her bump, stroked the wooden fretwork. “Rosewood, isn’t it?”

“Walnut, I think,” Gill answered.

“Ah. Can you give me and my sprog a tune?”

“I can’t,” Gill stood, climbed up on the stool. “It’s not working - probably busy digesting a dead mouse.” She opened the piano’s lid, peered inside. A hint of seasoning drifted from the piano’s innards, making Gill think of the exotic, not always successful meals she and Seb had cooked for Bella and her partner, Jon - a man who liked his dinners spiced with ginger, cayenne, chilli.

Tentatively, Gill lowered an arm to reach the mechanism. As her fingers found the hammers, clouds of yellow powder rose into the atmosphere. “Happy worms,” she said to Bella, “munching through a world of music.”

“Coffee?” Seb suggested, appearing at the door. The women nodded, their throats feeling sandpapered.

There existed, Gill was certain, a kettle. Rather a special, copper affair; but, special or not, the thing had vanished. And the kettle they’d brought from Bristol wouldn’t work because of Ramsons’s primitive wiring. “Can’t fit a square plug in a round hole,” Gill observed, “so we’ll have to light this thing.” She gave the old Rayburn a friendly kick. There must be plenty of kindling outside, it couldn’t take long to get the cream monster roaring.

It was still warm, but as she pulled an entire branch from a plum tree, Gill mumbled, “It’s almost September.” And the moment of change was with her again, pronounced in the garden as it had been in the house. Summer slipped away behind a cloud. Autumn fell as

over-ripe fruit, around her feet.

“It’s still August and I’m roasting,” Bella told her. Every aspect of Bella was comforting, rounded. Her belly and her breasts. Her face, pink as a child’s painting -with blue button eyes. Even her feet, in hand-made purple sandals, were oval.

They had to abandon all hope of coffee. The Rayburn hissed, spat at the apple and plum wood, blinded them with smoke - and remained decidedly cool.

“Anybody fancy rose-hip syrup?” Gill asked.

“Where there’s smoke, there’s hope,” Jon noted and produced, as if by magic - since he was cloaked in thick smog - several cans of beer. The new occupants and their helpers carried kitchen chairs through the scullery to the garden. Quite apart from the fog, the house already looked like a heritage museum that was in the throes of holding a jumble sale. Although their chairs wobbled in the long grass, everybody preferred being outside. Once seated, they took long gulps of beer, clearing their throats, mussing their heads.

“You’ve made a fairy ring,” Adam told them. It was true, the marks from the chairs would look like one of nature’s circles.

“Ring-a-ring-a-Rosie!” Seb sang, watching Rosie totter around the adults, fall, be lifted, cry a little but laugh a lot. Gill smiled at her friends and noticed, mid-smile, that Marty, the lame duck who had so rudely pulled the bell, was now swinging something from his left hand. Waving whatever it was, like incense. An object fashioned from red glass; its arc seemed to scorch the grass as the sun caught it. The rise and fall of reflected colour was hypnotic. Marty winked at Gill. “Neat bottle,” he told her, “what’s it for? Perfume?”

“No. Actually it’s not a bottle. Its use was medicinal - it’s a phial.” How could she sound so pompous? “It was Granddad’s,” with this statement, Gill turned nearly as red as the phial. All eyes were on her; she felt herself caught in a double betrayal. True, her step-grandfather had been a chemist, but he’d hardly have kept his pharmacopoeia at Ramsons. That phial must have belonged to Elizabeth Durry, who had no right to meddle, as meddle she did, in medicine and so-called homeopathy. As well as lying, Gill had denied her upbringing. Grandfather Tomas had been Dutch, straight-laced. His grandchildren never called him ‘Granddad’, never shortened Grandfather Tomas by a syllable. He would be positively rotating in his grave. The glare Gill

gave Marty was enough to make him toss the phial at her with a grunt; “Here.”

She caught it, just. Once she held it safe, Gill understood how Marty had been hoping she’d say ‘keep it, if you want’, which was all very well. Of course she’d like to give gifts to each of the helpers. A glass paperweight, a silver box, something small but precious. But nothing was hers to bestow. Her mother knew every item. One intricately patterned glass, missing from the sideboard, would be enough to send June stalking the house. Already there was the copper kettle to be accounted for.

There had been a time, Gill thought wistfully, when she was proud of owning nothing but her photographic equipment. This lack of possessions set her apart from her family, who were notorious hoarders. She had moved from flat to flat with carrier bags. Carrier bags! Now it took a camper, a Transit and a Morris Minor; next time, no doubt, it would require a fleet of pantechinons. Because whatever might be her share of this bounty, Gill would be obliged to keep it safe for eternity. Bits and pieces must become her charges. Her family would expect to see those pretty, but mostly useless heirlooms when the mood took them. They’d want to know they could open a coronation cake tin and exclaim; ‘Oooh, here’s the belt from your Froggy-went-a-courting dress that you wore when you were six.’

Sarah and Kate, Gill’s sisters, joined June in a vision. They had the eyes of a trio of bullfrogs as they ogled the red phial on Gill’s knees. But in reality, where were these other beneficiaries now, when needed? Where were their helping hands now that there was sorting to be done and buckets to be dealt with?

Rosie climbed on Seb’s knee, stuck her thumb in her mouth. “Oh no you don’t,” he warned gently, “sleep now and you’ll be awake tonight.” The toddler gazed adoringly into his eyes. Daddy’s girl. She never gave Gill enchanted stares. Seb stroked curls from his daughter’s forehead. When left alone, Gill’s hair was mousy; Rosie had her mother’s colouring but hair that twisted like her father’s, while Adam had straight locks, like Gill’s, but in a dark brown inherited from Seb. Gill thought again of Evangelina’s tresses, realizing that her own brightly dyed spiky style might be the result of a life-time’s longing for, and envy of, her grandmother’s glorious head. Gill’s lap felt suddenly empty; she was considering how to tempt Adam on to her knee when

the party of beer drinkers began to disperse.

“Back to work,” Jon announced, giving Bella a smile.

Unable to lift heavy furniture, Bella offered to help clear out a chest of drawers, to make space for her friends’ clothes. Seb and Gill would use the master bedroom, as Tilly had done. In the room once occupied by her parents, Tilly had slept, and eventually she had died, in the big, brass bed, indenting the mattress on which she had been conceived. Gill hurried ahead, giving herself time to shove the enamel bucket out of sight. “In here,” she called over her shoulder, and admitted, “I’ve always wanted to have this kind of treasure hunt through Tilly’s things.”

The friends sat together, sinking into the bedding. They grew childish with anticipation. Between them was the top drawer from the chest of drawers.

“You first.”

“No, you.”

“It’s your stuff, you put your hand in first.”

Gill hesitated. Those were somebody else’s possessions, no matter if the somebody was six feet under. She took a brooch, pieces of felt shaped like flowers, bunched on to a circle of linen, shades of purples and pinks. An inventive use of leftovers, as women’s magazines might say. Bella held up a string of paper-twist beads. Gill found a notebook bound with passe-partout.

“Where are we supposed to be putting this?” Bella asked as she explored deeper.

“In another drawer,” Gill grinned. It was all they could do, squeeze one lot of Tilly’s belongings in with another.

“Dance cards!” Bella cried, showing her friend a tiny card and its companion pencil. It was just possible to read the faded writing, to tell that the holder had been popular. Gill had never thought of Tilly out dancing, rarely pictured her as a young woman. But Tilly’s youth was confirmed by the next discovery: a scratched photograph. A group of young women sprawled on a mound of grass, in a semi-circle. Most sported hats, all wore white blouses and dark skirts. What astonished Gill was the cigarette burning in Tilly’s hand, that and the roguish grin on her tanned face. Surely Tilly had never been a smoker? Gill tried to pair the word ‘fag’ with the name ‘Matilda’. “I’m just lighting up a fag, Dear,” her great aunt announced in her soft, refined tones. No, Gill

thought not. Turning the photo over, Gill read: *'Hampstead Heath, me and the Clan. (For Flora's eyes only!) Tilly xxx.'*

"Where was she when it was taken?" Bella wanted to know.

"Teachers' training college, for gentlewomen. Very exclusive. Only Tilly went. Her other sisters didn't make it, and because Flora was the eldest, she had to stay home and help her mother."

As Gill spoke, Bella was already studying the next find, a postcard showing embroidered flags. Gill knew it had to be from Jethro, Edward and Elizabeth Durry's only son, but she said nothing. As before, she found herself defeated. A lifetime in a drawer, it was too much for one sultry afternoon. It involved more sharing than she could cope with, at a single sitting.

Perhaps all families were as special, complicated, secret and sinister as Gill's. She included sinister in her list of adjectives because she'd grown up with half known facts, with hints of a lost room, and other such mysteries, here in Ramsons. Certainly there were dark corners to her history. As a child she'd occasionally rounded these corners, running smack into the unfinished sentences of furtive adults. With her sisters, she had stood on the tips of her toes to peep at the goings that went on behind the shy smiles of those who had, long ago, been different people, more mobile and perhaps less decent. Implications, tempting as lumps of sugar, had been passed across the tea table. Without a doubt, disasters had struck, once-upon-a-time. Sometimes, Gill now believed, she might have heard screams, or their echoes. There was supposed to be a lost room, here in Ramsons. And then, of course, there was the cellar.

Enough, enough, she told herself. Remember how you loved Auntie Tilly, how kind she was, how constant. "I feel her here," Gill said quietly.

"When my sister died," Bella whispered back, Gill had noticed before that Bella couldn't speak of this loss in anything other than a whisper, "I saw her in the most unlikely places. Shops, car parks, public toilets. I thought it sad we had no special meeting place; but then we didn't have that when she was alive. The dead do sometimes meet with us, Gill. Nobody dares to mention it but it's true."

Whenever Bella spoke of her dead sister, Gill would suffer a glow of guilt because Seb, ever the actor, had once asked Gill to see if she could 'get inside Bella's sorrow'. He'd wanted to know, never having

lost anybody dear to himself, how long-term, heavy-duty grief *really* felt. Gill had treated this suggestion with the disdain it deserved. She'd actually hit Seb, she recalled, hard enough to make her point.

Without releasing it, Gill was replacing Tilly's treasure in the same drawer, laying each item down gently. She lifted her head to Bella and asked, "Have I disturbed a hornets' nest by coming here, do you think?"

Bella pursed her lips, thought this over. "If you have," she answered at last, "you needn't worry. They'll be your hornets; they'll have to accept you as their new queen."

"Somebody had to come here," Gill explained. "Mum's too settled, Kate's abroad, Sarah's got a nice home anyway..."

"*This* is a nice home," Bella reminded her, "big and quiet and almost sacred, to you. I worry about this one," she touched her bump, "starting out in a shared house full of scruffs like me and Jon, with nothing but sacks of wholefoods to play with. Can I be as good a mother as my mate Gill, I ask myself, when I have no ancestral home to share with my babe?" Gill smiled, having no need to answer. The idea of Bella being anything but the most delightful, joyous mum was too absurd. But, as if it did feel a call to respond, the lucky baby in Bella's womb gave a kick of appreciation that sent waves of pleasure through both the women on Tilly's bed.