

Treasure

Just a glimpse of the sunlight filtering through the lime trees on the Avenue and my eyes well with unshed tears. And I'm not the sentimental type. No, not at all.

Pale blossom scatters as I pull on to the drive, behind the bungalow's neat low wall and flowering cherry tree. There are a lot more cars at the road-side than last time I was here. Maybe the area's deteriorating? Time to get the sale organised.

Switching off the ignition I sit for a moment, then climb out and pull my case to the door. I feel heavy and lumbering. I shouldn't have had the full English this morning, I know, it's my own fault. I twist my key in the lock.

Inside, dust motes float in jewelled light shining through the coloured sun-ray panels in the glass door. The air in the hall glistens. As usual, everything looks smaller and more cramped. I toss my keys into the dish on the side table and head for the kitchen.

Why do I always go into the kitchen first?

I suppose it's the room I recall most fondly. There's a sofa now, where the wooden table and chairs once stood. When I think back I see the kitchen as it looks from beneath that table. Lying there for hours, I curled up with Smokey in her basket, purring, living and dreaming. The mid-wife found me there when Ella was born and I was fetched in to see my new sister.

The kitchen has been remodelled, like much else in the bungalow. There's a new dormer bedroom upstairs at the back where I can sleep. Why incur the expense of a hotel now that Mike and the girls have returned to London, back to work and school? Pat and Katie will be fine at their father's for a few days. He'll spoil them, but they deserve it, especially after the funeral. That was grim.

Ella read beautifully, of course, but we didn't really get the chance to talk. She suggested that she help with the clearing out, but there's no chance of that. She stayed in

a different, rather better, hotel than the one where we stayed. Straight back to Heathrow on the early train, I expect and, probably even now, is sipping her first mid-air cocktail.

That's what I could do with.

Mum's bedroom will be the most difficult.

I'll start there, once I've settled in. The parlour will be mainly for the house clearance people, though I'll just take a look. The heavy curtains are drawn back and the light is flat. The adjustable recliners with their chintzy velveteen sheen seem incongruous, like the large flat screen TV, but the open hearth and the net-curtained bay window are the same.

It's the massive old three-piece-suite from Grandma's house which I remember in this room, with its rough upholstery, crocheted antimacassars and hard smell. If I sat on it for too long, perched on the edge of the cushion, feet dangling above the floor, I would feel a rasping sensation on the back of my legs as my toes went numb. My skin was dimpled for half an hour afterwards.

The old piano stands in the corner, looking out of place. My parents couldn't play, but they believed that musical instruments were good things in themselves. Ella and I took lessons for a time. Not that Ella applied herself, of course. It was easier to attract attention by singing and dancing. I was the one who persevered and got the certificates. Pretty Ella was busy being the star of the show I was just the accompanist. In interviews she always says that she started performing early in life, though she doesn't say how.

I wonder if...?

No.

Just a deadened sound. The strings are broken.

On the sideboard my parents' sepia wedding photograph vies for attention with later ones - my graduation, my wedding, school photos of Pat and Kate, Ella at Stratford, Ella in front of the Hollywood sign, Ella with Luigi in the gardens of the Roman palazzo. Mum

and Dad did love their camera. They filled scores of bulging photo albums. I wonder where they are?

In the sideboard cupboard where I look I come across other things. Crayoned Mothers and Fathers Day cards, the mug I made in pottery class, school reports and certificates and copies of programmes from Ella's plays and shows. Pat's straw boater, which doubled as an Easter bonnet one year and Katie's ballet shoes.

Mum kept them all. She must have put them in here so that she could reach them when she began to find it difficult to get about. For easy access to a vanished past.

The girls hated coming here.

I should make a start, not sit around. Unpacking won't take long.

I haul my suitcase upstairs. There I glance through the window over-looking the garden. It's a new view. There used to be fields beyond the garden's end, where we weren't allowed to go, forbidden places. Now boxy, brick houses cover the land, surrounding the solitary old ash tree. People have to live somewhere, I suppose.

Time for mother's room. Dad's things will probably be in there too, I doubt that mother disposed of them.

I've brought several rolls of bin bags. The wearable clothes can go to the charity shop, the trinkets I'll discard and the decent jewellery I'll keep. The girls can each have a piece to remind them of their Gran and Ella might want something.

The room is tidy. Polished maple wardrobes and a matching dressing table take up too much space, fine pieces of furniture, though from a different age. On top of those wardrobes was where Mum and Dad used to hide Christmas and birthday presents, out of our reach. I must have been about eight when I worked that one out and thereafter Ella and I would regularly check the wardrobe tops, balancing, precarious, on the kitchen steps while mother was busy elsewhere.

Within half an hour I've filled five bin bags.

Mother's store of perfumes, many still in boxes wrapped with cellophane, I set aside.

'*L'air du temps*', '*Shalimar*'. Now for the dressing table.

In the three oval mirrors there are three images, of a middle aged woman with a pasty face and tired eyes, jaw line fleshy, dark hair pulled back, sitting on the silk covered stool. I pull out the slim vanity drawer. It is chock full. Jewellery cases and ornaments lie amid the clutter of make-up and hair grips. The lipstick cases are gilded and heavy.

I take one out, remove the tarnished cover and swivel it open. Glancing at the middle mirror I apply a vibrant pink to my mouth, smacking my lips closed like Mum used to do.

I've done that before. This bedroom was our dressing up room as children, where Ella and I danced in our rifled finery on the bed opposite the mirror, as princesses going to the ball. We regularly ransacked our mother's possessions.

What was that noise?

A key turning in the front door? I quickly smear the lipstick away.

"Hello! Who's there?"

"Caroline?"

It's Ella.

She stands, framed in the bedroom doorway, with that unconscious grace which I envied so. Still do, if truth be told. Her long legs in jeans, she wears an impossibly well-cut jacket like it's a cast-off and tendrils of long blonde hair escape her wound top-knot.

"I didn't expect to see you."

"I said I'd help," she's faintly indignant, but her attention is caught by the vanity drawer. "Oh, it doesn't seem to have changed at all - still full of tawdry treasure."

"No. Yes. Unsettling isn't it."

I tip the contents of the drawer out on to glass topped dressing table and begin scooping items into a bin bag.

“Hang on! Don’t just throw it all away! There are probably things of value in there.”
Ella rescues a heavy charm bracelet. “See - it’s our charms, my little shoe and your dog.”

When we played Monopoly Ella always chose the boot and I the Scottie, though the charms were a golden slipper and a dog of undetermined breed.

We pick through the jewellery, some of it very good indeed. I’d forgotten that Ella had often sent mother expensive gifts. Just as well that she’d stopped me throwing it all out.

“You should have all this back,” I suggest, expecting a refusal.

“Well, yes, it’s valuable and the money might come in useful.”

“Eh?” I do a double take. “Since when has money mattered to you?”

“It might now,” Ella dropped her gaze. “Luigi and I are getting a divorce.”

Just in time, I bite back the smart remark forming on my lips. Then I fall back on work.

“Do you have someone to represent you? You’ll need a good lawyer, his family will have plenty.”

“Not yet. I thought you might suggest someone.”

“I can, but it would be useful to know more before I do. Was there a pre-nup?”

“No,” Ella was uncomfortable. “It didn’t seem necessary and it would have shattered the romance of it all.”

“That raises the stakes.”

Ella seems to wither before my eyes. She was always unworldly. Luigi and his gang of aristocratic shysters will have a field day.

“What about the marital home?” I ask.

“Which one?”

“The Palazzo, I suppose.”

This conversation is becoming surreal.

“That’s been in his family for generations,” Ella replies. “I don’t have a claim on it.”

“Without a pre-nup, half of what’s his is yours.”

“Okay, but I think there’s a family trust which holds a lot of the assets.”

Maybe it was Ella who should have insisted on a pre-nuptial agreement?

“I’ll talk to people when I get back,” I say. “Who’s filing and where?”

“He is, in London.”

“That figures. Any grounds?”

“If you mean have I been unfaithful, no, of course not.”

Of course she wouldn’t. Ella was always annoyingly perfect.

“I think Carter’s your best bet. And it’ll be high profile, which will help.” Ella pales.

“You’ll have to give her full charge, if you’re to get her. And she fights ugly.”

“Like you.”

“It can be an ugly business.”

I never apologise for what I do, for what I’m good at.

“All this unpleasantness....” Ella cast around.

Ye Gods, some things never change. Beautiful, talented, good hearted Ella, who sailed away into a shiny new life on a tide of good fortune. Unpleasantness was for the rest of us, left behind, to gratefully receive the scraps of attention and affection which she might cast our way. Ella remembered birthdays and sent presents, but never came.

We became accustomed to seeing only her image, in magazines, on TV, or on posters metres high, not the living human being whom we knew. It still rankles, that abandonment, of Mum and Dad more than of me. When I went to university I didn’t mention my famous sister at all. I didn’t invite her to my graduation, she wouldn’t have come, just sent a ludicrously expensive present.

But I can't complain too much, I realise. I didn't return to the bungalow as often as our parents would have wished, either.

I'd been heavily pregnant with Pat when Mike and I attended Ella's wedding in Rome. Lodged in a fine hotel on the Via Veneto, we'd sloped off to Harry's Bar to avoid Mum and Dad, whose exclamations of pleasure, at the size of the bathroom, the soap, the breakfast, were almost as hard to bear as their subsequent tight-lipped attempts to treat it all as normal. The marriage service had been in an ancient and beautiful chapel, attended by minor royalty and Hollywood A-listers, with paparazzi waiting outside.

And now... the prodigal returns, brought down to earth at last. Welcome to the real world.

What am I thinking? She's my sister. Am I so embittered? I sound just like our mother, spewing out simplistic platitudes, too afraid, or too intellectually lazy, to reach beyond them. But I know that our mother would have been kinder.

"Look, I'll be part of the legal team, if you want?"

"Oh yes, please," Ella sniffed. "Mum and Dad would have been proud."

Well, they might have been, 'though they didn't exactly approve of divorce, as I discovered when I did it myself.

Perhaps it was just as well that they wouldn't see the fairy tale lose its lustre. Better that they believed in it to the end, rather than see it crumble.

"Are you staying over?"

"Yes, that's if you don't mind."

I shrug.

"No, of course not, this was your home too."

Ella reached for mother's housecoat.

"I'll make a fire, shall I? We can toast muffins. It'll be just like old times."

I watch her wrap the housecoat ties around her still tiny waist, jacket discarded. My breath catches in my throat and my chest feels squeezed.

She smiles, brightly.

“Now, where’s that coal scuttle? I’ll sweep out the cinders.”

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