

Family Album

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Extract

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by
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Allersmead

Gina turned the car off the road and into the driveway of Allersmead. At this point she seemed to see her entire life flash by. As the drowning are said to do. She thought of this, and that the genuinely drowning can never have been recorded on the matter.

Philip, in the passenger seat, saw a substantial Edwardian house, a wide flight of steps up to a front door with stained-glass panels, a weedy sweep of gravel in front. Emphatic trees all around. Sprawling shrubs. Stone urns that spilled lanky geraniums at the bottom of the steps. He had known Gina for six months and had been her lover for five of these.

Gina saw Alison standing on the top step, arms raised in rather theatrical greeting. She saw Charles emerge from the hall, staring down at them in what seemed mild surprise.

Philip saw a plump, smiling elderly woman with hair tumbling untidily from a bun, who was joined by a tall, stooped man wearing the kind of tweed jacket that you had thought was laid to rest by the 1970s. A large dog shambled at his heels, and slumped down on the top step.

Gina saw various spectres and dismissed them. Many people spoke, saying things they had been saying for years, and were also wiped. She brought the car to a stop, and got out, as did Philip. She said, 'Hi, there. This is Philip.'

Alison came down the steps, embraced Gina and beamed upon Philip. 'I'm Alison. Lovely to meet you.'

Charles simply stood. The dog thumped its tail.

Philip took the cases from the boot. He and Gina climbed the steps. Gina said, 'Philip, this is Charles – my father.'

Charles seemed to consider Philip, as though wondering if he might have seen him before. 'And Ingrid,' Gina continued.

Philip now saw another woman waiting in the large hall (black and white tiled floor, grandfather clock, umbrella stand, row of pegs loaded with raincoats, oak table strewn with junk mail), a statuesque and somewhat younger woman with straight fair hair and pink face, holding a garden trug full of greenery.

'Ingrid has such a splendid vegetable crop this year,' said Alison. 'We have broad beans coming out of our ears.'

The house smelled of cooking. You could unravel the constituent ingredients: garlic, herbs, wine – some earthy casserole, a coq au vin perhaps, or a boeuf en daube.

Philip observed the staircase with oak banisters, the landing halfway up with window seat and further stained-glass window, the door open into a room apparently filled with books. A big house. A house from the days when people – a kind of person – assumed a big house.

Gina experienced nostalgia, exasperation and a passionate need to be in their flat in Camden, with Philip opening a bottle of something after work.

Someone came galloping down the stairs, and halted at the bend, eyes on Gina. 'Christ!' he said. 'Not you again!'

'Sod off,' said Gina amiably.

Philip saw grubby jeans, a frayed sweater and some eerie affinity with Gina.

'Honestly, Paul!' cried Alison. 'Gina hasn't *been* here for over a year.'

'It's called irony,' said Gina. 'Not that he'd know that. So how are things, you?'

Paul came down the stairs. 'Why are you that brown colour?'

'Africa.'

‘We saw you on the news,’ said Ingrid. ‘Talking to those people fighting somewhere. Terrible.’

‘Indeed. Paul – this is Philip.’

‘Hi, Philip. Do you do Africa and stuff too?’

‘I’m in editorial. I stay behind a desk mostly.’

‘Very wise.’ Charles was moving towards the book-filled room but now halted. ‘*The Times*, isn’t it?’

‘No,’ said Gina. ‘You haven’t met Philip before. Not *The Times*.’

‘Forgive me.’ A kindly smile. ‘Not that I read it any longer. Once, it was the thinking man’s paper. Now, one shops around, and is generally dissatisfied. What do you read?’

‘*The Independent*,’ said Philip, after a moment. ‘By and large.’ He felt at a disadvantage, for reasons he could not identify.

‘For the compost heap those small papers are better,’ said Ingrid. ‘The ones with big headlines – what do you call them?’

‘Tabloids.’ Gina picked up her case. ‘Which room, Mum?’

‘I do not know why,’ Ingrid went on. ‘It is perhaps to do with the ink. I am putting on the kettle now.’ She walked away through a door in the back of the hall.

‘The big spare room, dear. And then come down and have tea. My orange and lemon cake. It used to be your favourite.’

Gina and Philip climbed the stairs. Gina led the way into a bedroom. Philip glanced around and sensed a room that had remained the way it was for some time: functional rather than aspiring – an Indian-print bedspread, the walls in need of a lick of paint. He went to the window and saw a great sweep of garden: a terrace, and then a huge lawn skirted by trees, dropping away to other areas, furtive and invisible.

‘Plenty of space.’

‘Just as well. There were six of us.’

‘Did David work on *The Times*?’

‘At one point.’

They were still at the stage when they skirted each other’s impedimenta. Philip’s ex-wife lurked in the wings. A former boyfriend of Gina’s sometimes surfaced in this way, causing slight difficulty. And there was Allersmead, which Gina had decided had best be confronted head-on. Philip’s parents were in undemanding retirement in Cornwall, and had already been dealt with, over a weekend.

‘So what’s the difference?’ Philip had said. ‘With your lot? Why is it apparently a bigger deal?’

‘You’ll see,’ she had replied.

Philip walked around the room. He picked up a photo on the mantelpiece. ‘Six. Only five here.’

‘Presumably someone wasn’t yet born.’

‘Paul is . . . ?’

‘That one. He came before me. Eldest.’

‘And you had a brace on your teeth. Your fans would be aghast.’

‘Shut up.’ She was emptying her bag onto the bed. T-shirt, toilet things, not much else. She always travelled light. In the wardrobe at the flat, there was the other bag, permanently packed with basic clothes, passport, cash – in case she had to go somewhere at a moment’s notice.

‘Brace and all, you were a fetching little girl.’

‘No one thought so at the time. Sandra was the pretty one.’

He moved back to the window. ‘Halcyon summer days. Hide and Seek. Picnics on the grass. It’s the stuff of dreams.’

‘Huh! By the way, the bathroom’s on the other side of the landing. The door sticks. You just push hard.’

‘Who does the cooking? Something smells amazing.’

‘My mother mostly, sometimes Ingrid.’ She had opened his

case, and was taking out his things. 'Which side of the bed do you want?'

'Left. I like that window. Who is Ingrid?'

'The au pair girl.'

'But . . .'

'But she is no girl? Indeed. Ingrid has been the au pair girl for many years.'

Philip appeared to consider this. 'And she is . . . not exactly English?'

'Swedish or Danish or something. Once.'

'No longer?'

'Well, look at her. She's Allersmead now, isn't she?'

Gina continued to hear voices; her life was still flashing at her. It seemed odd that Philip could be impervious to this, that a person with whom one had become so absolutely intimate could be so perversely ignorant. Not *know*. Not see and hear. One is sealed off, she thought. So is he. So's everyone. No wonder there's mayhem.

'We should go down.'

'Of course. The orange and lemon cake.' He had flung himself on the bed, arms behind his head. 'How extraordinary – that you spring from here, and I know nothing about it.'

'Rather what I was thinking. But I sprang some time ago, remember.'

'Even so . . . I have to say, I don't see much physical resemblance. A hint of your father's nose, perhaps. Remind me again what exactly is his field.'

'Field? Charles writes – wrote – books. Polymath – he'd probably buy that description. History, philosophy, sociology – a bit of everything.'

'The name did ring a bell. When I met you.'

'He'd be gratified.'

'Wide readership?' enquired Philip, after a moment.

‘Actually, yes. Accessible. More so than the academics, I suppose. Listen, we must go down.’

He held out his arms. ‘Come here.’

‘Not now. Later.’

★

The kitchen was the heartland of Allersmead. Of course. That is so in any well-adjusted family home, and Allersmead was a shrine to family. The kitchen was huge; once, some Edwardian cook would have presided here, serving up Sunday roasts to some prosperous Edwardian group. Now, there was – no, not an Aga but a big battered old gas cooker, a dresser cluttered with plates, cups, mugs, a scrubbed table that would seat a dozen. There were children’s drawings still tucked behind the crockery on the dresser, a painted papier mâché tiger on a shelf alongside a row of indeterminate clay animals that someone made earlier. There were named mugs slung from hooks: Paul, Gina, Sandra, Katie, Roger, Clare.

Philip ate two slices of orange and lemon cake, with evident enthusiasm.

Gina eyed the papier mâché tiger. Katie made that. So where’s my fish? We made them at school, and gave them to her for Christmas. The fish has not stayed the course, it would seem.

Tea was had. People came and went from the kitchen. Charles came, stood smiling benignly around, a cup in his hand, departed. Paul came, wolfed down cake and chocolate brownies, offered to service Gina’s car – ‘For a consideration, mind.’ After he had gone, an engine revved outside. Gina looked alarmed.

‘It’s all right,’ said Alison. ‘That’s his. He’s got an old Golf, since he started with the job. And he’s teaching himself about engines – so clever.’

Ingrid sat at the end of the table, shelling broad beans. She and Alison had a discussion about pommes dauphinois or just mashed. A big round old station clock on the wall ticked, perhaps a touch too loudly.

‘Show Philip the garden,’ said Alison. ‘Admire Ingrid’s vegetables. She has some dahlias too. Of course, this has never been exactly a display garden.’ She beamed at Philip. ‘We grew children, not flowers.’

Gina pushed her chair back noisily, stood, nodded at Philip. ‘Come on, then.’

They went down the steps from the terrace. It was August. The wide, sloping lawn was shaggy, but also yellowing here and there. A couple of hydrangeas glowed, but the general effect was one of unconstrained greenery – rampant shrubs, the presiding trees. A fat branch that reached out over the grass supported a homely swing – a piece of plank slung from two ropes. As they walked down to the hidden areas beyond the lawn, Philip saw a rope ladder hung from another tree, a further swing, a sandpit with a crust of dead leaves.

‘A sort of empty stage,’ he said. ‘Rather touching. No grandchildren yet?’

‘No one has got around to it.’

This area of the garden was more unkempt still, except for a disciplined vegetable garden at the far end – a wigwam of runner beans, bushy rows of broad beans, lines of carrots, lettuces, onions. A bank topped by trees marked the boundary; in front of this, there were sprawling bushes, patches of overgrown grass, an ancient rubbish heap of branches and rotting vegetation, a flat place in the centre, just below the lawn, where a rectangle of fading grass seemed to have archaeological significance.

Philip eyed this. ‘What happened here?’

‘Pond,’ said Gina. She walked over to the vegetables. ‘I am admiring you,’ she told them. ‘There. And the dahlias.’

Philip joined her. 'Have you really not been here for over a year?'

'Quite possibly. I do,' she said, 'lead quite a busy life. You may have noticed.'

'This garden must have been paradise for kids.'

'Paradise?' She laughed, for some reason. She was still looking at the vegetables. None of this stuff back then, she thought. Ingrid has found a new talent, a new use.

'There was one family of five at my school,' said Philip. 'I used to envy them – a sort of home-grown gang. I felt exposed by comparison, with just one mingy sister. Were you a gang?'

'Mafia activities were confined to the home. We ignored each other at school.'

'And where is everyone? You don't make much reference, you know. Paul, once or twice, that's all.'

'Dispersed.' Gina crushed a sprig of marjoram, sniffed. 'Wow – she's into herbs as well.'

'Dispersed where? Remind me.'

'Oh.' She waved a hand, vaguely. 'Roger's in Canada. Katie married an American. Clare – I'm not sure, right now. Sandra was last heard of in Italy, I believe. D'you fancy a walk around the neighbourhood? There's quite a nice park.'

'Is Paul always in residence?'

'Paul comes and goes,' she said. 'The park – and the church is worth a glance – Victorian Gothic, likely to be defrocked at any moment, congregation of a dozen. Let's go.' She walked away.

★

They lay in bed. The house creaked around them, as though subsiding. Boards groaned. A cupboard let out a small pistol shot. Gina remembered the place stuffed with ghosts, when she was eight. You crept to the bathroom at your peril.

‘I have overeaten,’ said Philip. ‘Excellent food. Is it always like this?’

‘My mother likes to cook.’

After a moment Philip said. ‘He is quite a talker, when he decides to.’

‘Decides is the right word.’

‘One gets a bit left behind at points. I am not strong on German philosophers.’

‘He probably wouldn’t like it if you were.’

A pause. ‘How does Alison manage? And – um – Ingrid?’

‘They are not required to.’

‘But he hasn’t been an academic as such? No job in a university?’

‘Regular employment would not have suited him, I guess.’

‘Did I overdo things a bit on Iraq? It was the one point when I felt relatively well informed. You can’t now insist that Blair must have had information about WMD, when patently he didn’t.’

‘My father can,’ said Gina.

‘Do you,’ enquired Philip ‘... did you ... tangle occasionally?’

She laughed. ‘I like “tangle”. So delicate. Yes, I tangled. Head-on resistance, more like.’

‘All the same – stimulating for the young mind. My parents were short on opinions.’

‘I won’t hear a word said against your parents.’

He rolled onto his side, reached out. ‘Come here.’

‘I should warn you – this bed is noisy.’

He squinted at her. ‘I thought this was the spare room. Oh – David ...’

She sighed.

‘Never mind – come here all the same.’

★

The family tumbles through the house – happy, smiling faces preserved on mantelpieces and windowsills, on the piano, framed on walls. The swaddled chrysalis in Alison’s arms becomes a sweet toddler with a mop of curls; another chrysalis arrives. The toddlers grow legs, wave from the branches of trees, turning cartwheels on the lawn. They are lined up in height order, each with an arm outstretched to another’s shoulder, grinning. The big ones carry the little ones piggy-back. Their faces are dappled with the sunshine of summers past. Once, they have built a snowman, with Charles’s pipe stuck in his mouth. They are preserved in an eternal childhood – ecstatic, absorbed, untroubled.

Philip studies this cavalcade, pausing on the staircase. ‘This is you? On the trampoline. With Paul?’

‘Yes and yes.’

‘Do you remember that?’

‘Remember?’ said Gina. ‘I’m never sure if you remember or are told. The photo tells me Paul and I trampolined that day. So we must have done.’

Philip eyed her. ‘What else are you told?’

Gina laughed. ‘Family history, of course. Everyone has one. We had selected extracts of yours at Fowey last month. Most edifying. That time you cut off your sister’s ponytail.’

‘A calumny,’ said Philip. ‘She asked me to.’

‘Not in your mother’s version. But there you go. Famously unreliable.’

Philip abandoned the trampoline photograph and continued down the stairs. Gina was becoming attuned to indications of his state of mind – that uncanny achievement of coupledness; she sensed that he was alert and interested, but also ill at ease. The set of his shoulders indicated this, the way his fingers drummed on the banisters. He headed for the kitchen, without looking at her. There was the smell and sound of breakfast: toast, the chink of cup set down on saucer.

She had a headache. Her seven-year-old self beamed at her from the wall, lacking front teeth. She wondered if Philip was wanting to escape. I told you, she said to his back. Bigger deal. I told you. His parents had been unexceptional to the point of anonymity. She had found them delightful.

Charles was seated in a big carver chair at the head of the table, wearing a plaid dressing gown and reading a book. He glanced up, raised a hand in some kind of greeting and continued to read.

Alison was at the cooker. 'Tea or coffee? I'm doing bacon and fried egg for anyone who'd like.'

Philip said that he would like.

Charles said, without looking up from his book, 'This chap has the cold war all wrong. Would you subscribe to the theory that mutually assured destruction was the deciding factor, David?'

Alison turned, shot a rueful little smile at Gina and Philip. 'Fried bread as well, Philip?'

Charles was not waiting for Philip's view on the cold war. 'Apart from anything else, the man has the Soviet mind-set all wrong ...'

'Are you reviewing the book?' enquired Gina.

Charles ignored this. He picked up his cup, drank and waved the empty cup in Ingrid's direction. She reached for the coffee pot and refilled it.

'Charles doesn't do much reviewing these days,' said Alison. 'It was always a bit of a chore.'

From the hall, there came a rattle, and a thump. Evidently the newspaper had arrived. Charles had turned back to his book but now held out a hand, palm up. Alison left the room, returned with the paper and gave it to Charles.

'Time was,' said Gina, 'you were all over the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer* or whatever. I hadn't realized it was a chore.'

Charles opened the newspaper, and became absorbed.

‘One bacon and egg coming up,’ cried Alison gaily. ‘Yours, Philip.’

Charles turned the pages of the paper with a lavish movement, sweeping a slice of toast to the floor. ‘Time was, Gina,’ he said, ‘you were interviewing town councillors on local radio. Now you’re a television face. One moves on.’ He smiled; no reproof intended, it would seem.

Or off, thought Gina. You’re not being asked any more, are you?

The dog had neatly secured the fallen toast and retreated under the table with it.

Ingrid spoke for the first time. ‘On television you do not notice the scar. Almost not at all.’

‘That’s what make-up ladies are for,’ said Gina. ‘I’ll pass on your commendation, Ingrid.’

Philip was looking from her to Ingrid and back again. He seemed about to speak, and then to think better of it. He began to eat, vigorously.

Which scar story did I give him? Gina wondered. The accident-in-the-school-playground one or the fell-off-my-bike one? There was a repertoire, with which she had grown careless.

‘You always look wonderful, dear,’ said Alison. ‘And you’ve always washed your hair, even when it’s in a refugee camp or somewhere.’

‘And you do not make mistakes when you speak. Not even um and ah, very much.’ Ingrid was apparently warming to the theme.

Philip, in the middle of eating bacon and egg, set down his knife and fork, rather violently.

‘I do my best,’ said Gina crisply. ‘I wonder if I could have some more coffee? And where is Paul?’

‘In bed,’ said Charles, without looking up from the paper. ‘Where else? His natural habitat for many a year.’

‘He’s finding the job quite demanding.’ There was the faintest note of reproach in Alison’s voice. ‘He has to be there by eight thirty, so he rather needs his Sunday lie-in.’

‘Sometimes he can take from the garden centre things they do not want,’ said Ingrid. ‘Last week we had a camellia and some nice big pots.’

‘Damaged stock,’ explained Alison. ‘The pots were a bit chipped, and the camellia had been frosted.’

‘A career in horticulture is an unexpected departure. But of course there have been a number of new beginnings for Paul.’ It was hard to tell if Charles spoke sardonically or not. ‘None of them involving much by way of departure from here.’

‘What does he do at the garden centre?’ asked Gina.

‘He is on the till,’ said Ingrid. ‘And he moves plants about. I expect he has to go in this afternoon.’

‘And he labels new stock,’ added Alison. ‘And helps people find things. Poor dear, I dare say he *will* have to go in later – Sunday is their busy day. Now what do you two have in mind? We’re having a roast for lunch, of course, but we’ll have it latish so you may just want to laze around till then.’

★

‘On your own, Philip,’ says Alison. ‘Where’s Gina got to?’

‘Gone to get a paper. She can’t do Sunday without one.’

‘And Charles has taken ours off to his study, I suppose. I’ll join you – lunch is looking after itself at the moment and the terrace is so lovely on a sunny morning.’ She plumps herself down. ‘Oops! I always forget this is the broken chair. Paul jumped on it once, years ago, naughty boy. And do you see all those chipped bits on the balustrades? That’s where Katie and Roger used to bang their trikes into them, when they were small. This is a real *family* house and it’s got all the scars. Such happy memories – everything reminds me of something. We planted that silver birch on Gina’s first birthday – look at the

size of it now. Were you in a large family, Philip? Ah . . . The thing is, I only ever wanted children, and what's wrong with that? say I.' A gay laugh. 'Such a wonderful base for them this was – a real old-fashioned family. The sight of them all trooping off to school; I can see them now. And I'd count them back in, later, and there'd be a proper tea waiting for them, and everyone had their special place at the table. I'm sure Gina's told you lots. It's the first ten years that count, isn't it? Ten, fifteen. That's what sets anyone up for life, isn't it? I had a blissful childhood myself, and I've always been thankful. It still feels like yesterday – theirs, I mean, not mine.' More laughter. 'I can never quite believe they've all grown up and . . . no, not *gone*, of course, not gone at all, just moved away a bit. Far as I'm concerned, they're all still here, like a lot of dear little ghosts.' Alison sighs. 'Such a happy time, Philip, you can't imagine. Of course, we've been so lucky. Nobody . . . well, just the occasional little upset, but that's normal, isn't it? Real old-fashioned family life – you can't beat it.'

★

'I will make you coffee,' says Ingrid. 'And for Gina too? No, it is no bother. Please sit,' she adds graciously.

Philip sits down at the kitchen table. Ingrid takes kettle to sink, with slow deliberation, reaches for coffee jar and mugs. 'Here is for Gina her mug. That is nice. It is a pity she cannot come home more. It is a pity all of them cannot come home more. Now is rather empty in this house, but it is good Paul is still here. For Paul there has been going away and coming back. It is a pity there are no grandchildren but perhaps in the end. Alison would very much like children again. Charles I am not so sure but he has his work. I have been here now of course a long time but it is still funny in this house with no children. Do you have children, Philip? No. Well, perhaps one

day. Six children was much work but we were two women always and that was good. This is a big house so plenty to do but plenty of room also – everyone has their space. Charles of course must have space, especially Charles. When there were children, some took more space than others, but that is how it is in a family, I think. Sometimes squabbling, sometimes some little bother. You remember the good times only. The bad times – well, the less that is said the better, isn't it? Do you like sugar, Philip? For Gina I think it is no sugar.'

★

Philip meets Charles on the stairs.

Charles pauses. 'Ah, David. Now, I put it to you – if Blair's briefings persuaded him of the existence of WMD, then he was morally bound to press for invasion. The man had no option.'

★

Paul emerges from the bathroom, a towel round his waist. 'Oh God – what's the time?'

'Half-past twelve,' says Philip.

'Shit. I should have been at the garden centre an hour ago. Oh well – the car broke down again, I guess.' He grins. 'So what do you make of the ancestral nest? Home sweet home. Has Gina given you the conducted tour? The height-measurement wall? The dressing-up drawer? No? Shame on her. No sense of tradition. Has she told you about the cellar game and the scary cupboard? No? What's the matter with the girl? Oh – this house has seen a thing or two.' Paul laughs, hitches the towel, moves off down the corridor.

★

Each room in the house is indeed branded. The tour that Gina has not proposed would perhaps start in the big drawing

room. Here, there is the open fireplace up which, once, letters to Father Christmas were posted. Moving across the hall from the drawing room, we are in Charles's study, which is rather less imprinted with family life, and where a bolt on the inside of the door seems to suggest a certain fortress attitude. The kitchen is of course vibrant with references – the mugs, the handiwork – and if we climb the stairs we find the measurement wall at the far end of the landing. Here are six columns, with meticulous pencil marks alongside each – a column for each child, with a horizontal line marking the child's height at each birthday. Gina at six tops Paul at the same age, but Paul then rushes upwards, and outstrips everyone by sixteen, after which the record ceases. Katie seems always to have been the runt, while Clare's teenage growth spurt is remarkable. The deep bottom drawer of a huge tallboy close by contains the dressing-up clothes – a morass of cowboy outfits, witch's cloaks, tutus, masks, policeman's helmets, animal costumes and an assortment of adult discards by way of spangly dresses, shawls, junk jewellery and a battered top hat.

Each bedroom can be seen to be scarred, on close inspection. In one, someone has drawn a row of rudely naked figures under the windowsill, where you would only find them if you were looking hard. In another, there are ink blotches on the ceiling – an interesting achievement. It is clear that redecoration has never been a high priority at Allersmead. The master bedroom is shabby, with plum velvet curtains faded on the folds to beige, and a carpet with patches worn to the backing. There is a vast four-poster bed – the site, it must be supposed, of all that impressive procreation. And there is a cupboard in the wall, full of the parental clothes, a place of darkness and long shadowy shapes – scary, indeed – into which once upon a time people pushed one another and shut the door upon the screams.

The cellar. At one side of the house there is a flight of steps leading down to a black door. The key is in the lock – an immense iron key. Turn it, open the door and you are in a dank, dark semi-subterranean space lit by a couple of murky windows, high up at ground level. The cellar has a damp brick floor and, against one wall, a huge wine rack in which presumably the Edwardian haute bourgeoisie once stored their tippie. Elsewhere there are wooden shelves crammed with detritus of one sort or another – mouldy cardboard boxes, rusty tools, an old mattress, cobwebbed milk bottles and jam jars, a bucket without a handle, a gas mask, a bird cage, some tin trays. In one corner stands a defunct lawnmower, apparently welded to the ground. Along one wall a packing case and a doorless cupboard have been turned into what seems like improvised housing, and above them there is a board with a wavering chalked scrawl. Headings – FORFITS and PENALTYS – and beneath them names and numbers: Paul 5, Gina 4, Sandra 5 . . . Paul 1, Gina 2 . . . Clare 16. Something went on here, once.

★

‘What happens in the cellar?’ enquires Philip, eyeing that door.

Gina shrugs. ‘Black beetles. Spiders. Cellar life.’

They are wandering in the garden, after lunch – after too much lunch. Roast leg of lamb, mint sauce, roast potatoes, broad beans – the works. Rhubarb crumble with cream. Cheese board for any survivors.

‘Shall we think about going home soon?’ says Gina.

Philip considers. ‘Of course, there is a sense in which you *are* at home.’

‘I am talking about the flat.’

He puts his arm round her. ‘I know you are. Joke. Of a kind. All the same, say what you like, your mother is a crack

cook. OK, let us get ourselves together. Do you want to take those newspapers back? Your father would no doubt use them.'

★

Philip carried down their bags. Gina was in the hall with Alison and Ingrid. Alison was saying that it had been so good to meet Philip, and they must come again soon. Gina was saying yes, sure, of course, trouble is I never know when I'll have to be off somewhere. Ingrid had put beans, carrots, lettuce, herbs into a carrier bag: 'The lettuce you must eat this evening, while it is fresh. The herbs put in water.'

Alison called out. 'Charles – they're going.'

Charles emerged from his study. Gina took a step forward, kissed him. 'We're off,' she said. 'Traffic – Sunday evening. Don't want to leave it too late.'

Charles accepted the kiss, patted her arm. 'Good to see you other than on a screen. Not that I look at much TV – I prefer to read the news – but we catch you occasionally.' He held out his hand to Philip. 'Nice to have met you ... er. Hope I didn't go on too much last night.' A quizzical glance. 'Company can set me off.'

Philip said that he had enjoyed their discussion.

Alison was waving a piece of paper at Gina. 'Addresses, dear. Everyone's addresses – email and otherwise – since you're not sure if you've got them or not. Roger's moved to a new hospital in Toronto. And Katie's husband is being transferred to San Francisco – they're so pleased. Clare's touring at the moment with the dance company – in Japan – she sends such pretty postcards. So there's only her Paris address. Sandra of course has her flat in Rome.'

'And we think there is perhaps an Italian man,' said Ingrid.

'Do we?' said Charles. 'I have not been told this. Are his intentions honourable?'

Alison laughed. 'Really! Sandra is thirty-eight. I expect she can look after herself.'

'No doubt. I was merely trying to be the responsible father. So there you are, Gina – that's the run-down on the family. Global displacement, you note.'

'We have still Paul,' said Ingrid.

'And are so thankful that we do.' Alison embraced Gina, dabbed her face against Philip's. 'I wish you could have seen more of him but of course the garden centre calls. Have a good journey. Come again soon.'

Philip drove this time. As the car went through the gates, he saw the group on the steps reflected in the driving mirror – Alison and Ingrid waving, Charles simply standing, the dog at his feet, tongue lolling. He thought they looked firmly set in some other time – about 1975, maybe – and said so, intending no criticism.

'Seventy-seven, probably,' said Gina. 'The summer of my eighth birthday.'

Except that they are not, she thought. She saw her young mother, her young father. She saw everybody in another incarnation – Paul, Sandra, Katie . . . all of them. Aunt Corinna – she was there then too. Not set fast – moved on and away. Except that it is all still there also, going on just as it did. That day. Other days.