Reading in Bed

Sue Gee

Published by Headline Review

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

1

There they go, two clever women of sixty, making their way through the wet towards the car. They've been to a literary festival; now they are going home: Dido to York, and Jeffrey; Georgia to London, and an empty house. Clouds roll back over the hills: it's clearing.

– It's clearing, says Dido, avoiding a puddle.

– Just as we leave. Georgia shakes out and furls her umbrella, and they stand for a moment, both tall, each with a different kind of elegance, taking it all in: the soaking emerald fields beyond the car park, the scattered sheep, the forest, dense as legend, smothering the Brecon hills. The canvas of the festival marquees sits pleasingly amidst all this; postmodern flags, slashed strips of parchment white, flutter at the entrance as the last of the rain blows away and the afternoon sun breaks through. From inside a marquee comes a burst of welcoming applause.

– We've heard him before, says Georgia, as Dido all at once looks wistful. – We really don't need—

– I know. It's just—

– It's been lovely. If we stayed till the end we'd have to stay another night.

– I know.

– And I hate arriving home on a Monday. Georgia is getting her keys out as they reach the car. – It puts me out of sorts. I like the week to start properly: breakfast at my own table, and things in view.

– As if you were still working, in fact.

– Quite. There is much to be said for routine. Georgia unlocks the car, and puts her umbrella in the boot, where their bags are already resting, bulging with books, new and secondhand. The town is the kingdom of secondhand books. They settle themselves inside, the travel rug folded on the back seat. It is a mark of something, to buy a travel rug, and Georgia had felt it when she did so. She starts up, puts the wipers on, then off, looks in the mirror.

– Are we clear?

– There's a dog, says Dido, looking to the left.

– Is there an owner?

– No. Yes. It's all right, he's seen us.

– The dog?

– The owner. He's calling him. You're all right now.

– I say! says Georgia, backing slowly. – Call orf your dog!

They both smile, seeing approximately the same self-important figure striding across some middle-England field.

– I shall miss you, says Dido, as they turn, and drive towards the entrance. Wild barking follows them.

– Me, too. Now, then. Georgia scans the narrow hilltop street, thronged with shoppers and festival-goers. Everyone has a carrier bag of books. – OK, she says, seizing a moment between a Land Rover and an estate car, and they drive slowly down the hill. A sheepdog with mad pale eyes hangs out of the back of the Land Rover, panting.

– More dogs than people, says Dido.

They drive beneath the banner strung across the street: *People say that life is the thing, but I prefer reading.*

– And so say all of us, she adds, lowering the window a little. The sun is getting stronger. It's all at once quite warm. – I must look up Logan Pearsall Smith when we get home.

– Oh, don't you know him? Georgia slows by the clock tower.

People are having lunch at the pavement café where they themselves lunched yesterday. – He was a favourite of Henry's father. She looks to the right and left on the main road. – Essays, mostly. *There are few sorrows, however poignant, in which a good income is of no avail*.

Dido laughs. – I must tell Jeffrey.

– And also – Georgia pulls out, and turns down the hill – *Thank heavens the sun has gone in, and I don't have to go out and enjoy it*. Or was that Sydney Smith? She picks up speed. – I always think of Smith when I visit Maud: *In the country one has the feeling that creation is about to expire before teatime*.

– How is Maud these days?

– Worrying. I've only seen her once since the funeral.

They pass the garden of a gallery, planted with strange wooden carvings. – Something will have to be done, but I haven't the strength.

– I've never known you not have strength. Perhaps Chloe could help.

– Perhaps.

– They do have things in common.

– I'm afraid that's true.

They're out in open country now, spinning along on a good smooth road between black and white Tudor houses, dazzling fields of rape, young corn.

Dido puts her hand on Georgia's arm. – It's been perfect. I've loved every minute.

– Me, too, says Georgia again, and then, as the toll bridge approaches – Have you fifty pence?

Dido opens her bag. They rattle over the peaceful Wye. People are camping in a field beside it, gliding serenely in canoes. The river mirrors swans, fishermen, early summer sky. They pay for their ticket and succumb to ices, pulling up beneath a tree to lick away at chocolate and vanilla. Then they're properly off, looking

out for the sign to Hereford, where Dido will catch the train to York, changing twice and arriving home at midnight. Jeffrey will be waiting at the station.

– How many books did you buy? asks Georgia.

– At least a dozen. At least. They're like drugs, those signing queues. And put me in Addyman's and I lose all reason.

They're on their way. They go through everyone they've heard. Enormous names fill the car.

– Just to look into Lessing's eyes.

– Benn was marvellous.

– He always is.

– Pinter was—

– Pinter. No more need be said.

– As he himself might have—

– Quite.

They drive on at one accord, as they have been since distant college days. There's not much traffic, out in open country: they've timed it well. Farmland stretches out beneath the hills, elaborate clouds are lit by the sun, the country air blows in.

– God, says Georgia. – London, after this.

– But it's lovely, where you are.

They slow at the approach to Credenhill, a charming village next to the headquarters of the SAS. Rolls of barbed wire top huge fences. Then they come to the Hereford road, and now the traffic thickens, full of Sunday outings. Georgia looks at the clock.

– We'll be fine, says Dido, and indeed they reach the station with a good fifteen minutes before the train to Crewe, and stand beneath hanging baskets filled with plastic flowers, watching the come and go of Sunday travellers, and a sweet young Labrador, being good as gold.

– Will you be all right? asks Dido. – All that long drive.

– I'll be fine. *Bookclub*, *Poetry Please*. I should be home by seven.

– Give the cats my love. Who's feeding them?

– Next door. They're very good.

The station announcement announces Dido's train. They gaze along the track.

– And Chloe, of course, says Dido. – Will you be seeing her this week?

– I expect so. And give my love to Jeffrey.

– I will. And he sends his.

Dido is painfully aware of Henry's absence from this exchange, but says only, again, as so often: – Will you be all right?

– I'll be fine, says Georgia, as she always does, and then the train comes in, and they settle Dido in her reserved corner seat, facing the engine, and heave up her bag on the rack. They kiss.

– Safe journey. We'll speak in the week.

– We will.

And Georgia climbs down, stands waiting, as the last door slams and then the whistle blows. They're off. Dido presses her hand to her lips; Georgia, always less demonstrative, nods and smiles as the blown kiss comes towards her. She stands there waving as the train pulls out, waits until it has rounded the bend, then makes her way out to the car park, following the joyous Labrador and his family, feeling a cloud of appalling loneliness settle upon her in moments.

– Stop it, she says aloud, but no one notices.

She reaches the car, unlocks it, has the radio on in a trice.

– Welcome to *Bookclub*, says James Naughtie kindly.

Georgia fastens her seat belt, and drives away.

London on a summer evening. *Pick of the Week* has taken her through the approaches: along the Westway and over Marylebone Flyover. Tower blocks glitter on either side: as always, returning, Georgia feels a pulse of excitement: this is the city, the splendid rush and throb. Everything starts here. But it's hard to sustain this feeling as litter blows along the Marylebone Road, and though her

spirits rise a little at the glimpse of blossom in Regent's Park they sink again at Euston, and the clog of traffic crawling towards King's Cross, where the building of the Eurostar network has held everyone up for years. Well. One day perhaps she and Dido will use it to go to Paris. Perhaps Jeffrey will join them. She passes the British Library, and here her heart does lift, for the Library's airy spaces have nourished her for years, and she knows that by tomorrow she'll be back in the swim of life in London, refreshed by a week in the country and getting on with things. Well, pretty much. As much as anything is a swim these days.

Georgia leaves King's Cross behind her, drives to the Angel, Islington, a place she has known for over three decades but where she now feels adrift amidst a sea of youth: spilling out of pubs, crowding the pavements, talking for England on their mobiles.

Upper Street, with its rich mix of shops and cafés, as every estate agent describes it, is basking in the warmth. The Screen on the Green is showing something interesting and French. Outside the Marie Curie shop on Highbury roundabout stand clumps of black bags and a little rocking horse. Goodness. How could you give away a rocking horse? Would you not cherish it for ever? If Georgia had a grandchild she'd stop and take it, dropping in a donation next day, but she does not have a grandchild – will she ever? – and she drives past, taking a last look in the mirror at the horse's scarlet reins, and turns into Corsica Street, leaving the traffic behind. She's almost home.

Highbury Fields is enjoying the evening sun. Queues at the ice-cream vans, tennis, joggers, dog walkers; ball games and the end of a picnic in the dog-free enclosure at the top. Chloe took her first steps in there, light years ago. Well, thirty years ago. Chloe is thirty-one this week. Dear God, where have three decades gone? Swimmers stand talking outside the pool, children shriek in the playground, cyclists spin by. All this activity, all this vibrant life. Georgia drives slowly through it all, up a Georgian terrace and

round, right round, into her own quiet street at last. Home again, home again, jiggety-jig, she hears her mother sing through the mists of time. There's a space outside her own front door: fantastic. She pulls up, turns off the engine.

For a moment she sits there, feeling she'll never move again. The sun is sinking over the rooftops, the Harrisons are walking up the street: she with the pushchair, he with their little boy on his shoulders. They wave and smile. Then they go into their house, and close the door. Georgia takes an enormous breath, and rallies. She gets out as stiffly as four hours' solid driving leaves you, stretches, heaves out her bag. Tomorrow she'd better have a swim. She points her keys at the car doors and hears the little beep as they lock. Modern times: so clever.

She walks through her front gate, brushing the lavender with her bag. The window-box geraniums have come on inches, just in a week. When she's settled in, she'll do the evening watering: comforting thought. And there are Tristan's ears, just visible behind the scarlet flowers. She unlocks the door, puts the bag down, stands there. The house smells shut up and feels as dead as a doornail.

– Come on, she says to the dusty air, and then: – Hello?

And the soft drop of cats from table and sofa to floorboards sounds at once. They're padding through sleepily; Isolde makes her little sound.

Fond embraces. – Thank God you're here.

Along past the stairs to the kitchen. Note on the table, a week's post, Saturday's milk in the fridge. Unlock the door to the garden. It's tiny, but they made it just right. Alchemilla and white forget-me-nots spill over the brickwork, the tulips are stunning. There are shrubs packed into every corner, a birdbath, a little pond. Last year a blackbird nested in the holly in the corner: in time for Henry to watch the male fly in and out to feed his mate, though not to see the fledgelings fly. Nor did he see the little bluetits emerge from the box on the wall: four, though one fell two weeks earlier, smack on

to the brick path. It died as only a nestling dies: naked, blind and tragic. Georgia, when she found it, had (unusually) sobbed her heart out.

Now she stands there, looking at it all. Entrancing cream sprays of love-lies-bleeding turn a flowerbed into a wedding. Gentle moss covers the plinth on which Athene rests, her lovely stone head placed perfectly in that corner, ivy trailing down. Just in a week, everything's clumped up. Here are the cats, asking for supper. Tristan twines round her ankles. Isolde drinks from the pond. Birds sing from gardens all around, the traffic is a distant hum.

– OK, says Georgia. – Here we are again. And she turns decisively, goes in to shake cat food into dishes, read the neighbourly note, go to the loo and return to pour a drink, opening the bottle put in the fridge when she left, all ready for her return. She takes the glass into the garden, sips, rests it on the birdbath. She turns on the hose. Here comes the magical pattering fall of water on to earth and leaf and brick. The sinking sun just catches it all. She's home.