The Little Stranger

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Extract

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I first saw Hundreds Hall when I was ten years old. It was the summer after the war, and the Ayreses still had most of their money then, were still big people in the district. The event was an Empire Day fête: I stood with a line of other village children making a Boy Scout salute while Mrs Ayres and the Colonel went past us, handing out commemorative medals; afterwards we sat to tea with our parents at long tables on what I suppose was the south lawn. Mrs Ayres would have been twenty-four or -five, her husband a few years older; their little girl, Susan, would have been about six. They must have made a very handsome family, but my memory of them is vague. I recall most vividly the house itself, which struck me as an absolute mansion. I remember its lovely ageing details: the worn red brick, the cockled window glass, the weathered sandstone edgings. They made it look blurred and slightly uncertain—like an ice, I thought, just beginning to melt in the sun.

There were no trips inside, of course. The doors and French windows stood open, but each had a rope or a ribbon tied across it; the lavatories set aside for our use were the grooms' and the gardeners', in the stable block. My mother, however, still had friends

among the servants, and when the tea was finished and people were given the run of the grounds, she took me quietly into the house by a side door, and we spent a little time with the cook and the kitchen girls. The visit impressed me terribly. The kitchen was a basement one, reached by a cool vaulted corridor with something of the feel of a castle dungeon. An extraordinary number of people seemed to be coming and going along it with hampers and trays. The girls had such a mountain of crockery to wash, my mother rolled up her sleeves to help them; and to my very great delight, as a reward for her labour I was allowed to take my pick of the jellies and 'shapes' that had come back uneaten from the fête. I was put to sit at a deal-topped table, and given a spoon from the family's own drawer—a heavy thing of dulled silver, its bowl almost bigger than my mouth.

But then came an even greater treat. High up on the wall of the vaulted passage was a junction-box of wires and bells, and when one of these bells was set ringing, calling the parlourmaid upstairs, she took me with her, so that I might peep past the green baize curtain that separated the front of the house from the back. I could stand and wait for her there, she said, if I was very good and quiet. I must only be sure to keep behind the curtain, for if the Colonel or the missus were to see me, there'd be a row.

I was an obedient child, as a rule. But the curtain opened onto the corner junction of two marble-floored passages, each one filled with marvellous things; and once she had disappeared softly in one direction, I took a few daring steps in the other. The thrill of it was astonishing. I don't mean the simple thrill of trespass, I mean the thrill of the house itself, which came to me from every surface—from the polish on the floor, the patina on wooden chairs and cabinets, the bevel of a looking-glass, the scroll of a frame. I was drawn to one of the dustless white walls, which had a decorative plaster border, a representation of acorns and leaves. I had never seen anything like it, outside of a church, and after a

second of looking it over I did what strikes me now as a dreadful thing: I worked my fingers around one of the acorns and tried to prise it from its setting; and when that failed to release it, I got out my penknife and dug away with that. I didn't do it in a spirit of vandalism. I wasn't a spiteful or destructive boy. It was simply that, in admiring the house, I wanted to possess a piece of it—or rather, as if the admiration itself, which I suspected a more ordinary child would not have felt, entitled me to it. I was like a man, I suppose, wanting a lock of hair from the head of a girl he had suddenly and blindingly become enamoured of.

I'm afraid the acorn gave at last, though less cleanly than I'd been expecting, with a tug of fibre and a fall of white powder and grit; I remember that as disappointing. Possibly I'd imagined it to be made of marble.

But nobody came, nobody caught me. It was, as they say, the work of a moment. I put the acorn in my pocket, and slipped back behind the curtain. The parlourmaid returned a minute later and took me back downstairs; my mother and I said goodbye to the kitchen staff, and rejoined my father in the garden. I felt the hard plaster lump in my pocket, now, with a sort of sick excitement. I'd begun to be anxious that Colonel Ayres, a frightening man, would discover the damage and stop the fête. But the afternoon ran on without incident until the bluish drawing-in of dusk. My parents and I joined other Lidcote people for the long walk home, the bats flitting and wheeling with us along the lanes as if whirled on invisible strings.

My mother found the acorn, of course, eventually. I had been drawing it in and out of my pocket, and it had left a chalky trail on the grey flannel of my shorts. When she understood what the queer little thing in her hand was, she almost wept. She didn't smack me, or tell my father; she never had the heart for arguments. Instead she looked at me, with her tearful eyes, as if baffled and ashamed.

'You ought to know better, a clever lad like you,' I expect she said.

People were always saying things like that to me when I was young. My parents, my uncles, my schoolmasters—all the various adults who interested themselves in my career. The words used to drive me into secret rages, because on the one hand I wanted desperately to live up to my own reputation for cleverness; and on the other it seemed very unfair, that that cleverness, which I had never asked for, could be turned into something with which to cut me down.

The acorn was put on the fire. I found the blackened nub of it among the clinker, next day. That must have been the last grand year for Hundreds Hall, anyway. The following Empire Day fête was given by another family, in one of the neighbouring big houses; Hundreds had started its steady decline. Soon afterwards the Ayreses' daughter died, and Mrs Ayres and the Colonel began to live less publicly. I dimly remember the births of their next two children, Caroline and Roderick—but by then I was at Leamington College, and busy with bitter little battles of my own. My mother died when I was fifteen. She had had miscarriage after miscarriage, it turned out, all through my childhood, and the last one killed her. My father lived just long enough to see me graduate from medical school and return to Lidcote a qualified man. Colonel Ayres died a few years later—an aneurism, I think.

With his death, Hundreds Hall withdrew even further from the world. The gates of the park were kept almost permanently closed. The solid brown stone boundary wall, though not especially high, was high enough to seem forbidding. And for all that the house was such a grand one, there was no spot, on any of the lanes in that part of Warwickshire, from which it could be glimpsed. I sometimes thought of it, tucked away in there, as I passed the wall on my rounds—picturing it always as it had

seemed to me that day in 1919, with its handsome brick faces, and its cool marble passages, each one filled with marvellous things.

So when I did see the house again—almost thirty years on from that first visit, and shortly after the end of another war—the changes in it appalled me. It was the purest chance that took me out there, for the Ayreses were registered with my partner, David Graham; but he was busy with an emergency case that day, so when the family sent out for a doctor the request was passed on to me. My heart began to sink almost the moment I let myself into the park. I remembered a long approach to the house through neat rhododendron and laurel, but the park was now so overgrown and untended, my small car had to fight its way down the drive. When I broke free of the bushes at last and found myself on a sweep of lumpy gravel with the Hall directly ahead of me, I put on the brake, and gaped in dismay. The house was smaller than in memory, of course—not quite the mansion I'd been recalling—but I'd been expecting that. What horrified me were the signs of decay. Sections of the lovely weathered edgings seemed to have fallen completely away, so that the house's uncertain Georgian outline was even more tentative than before. Ivy had spread, then patchily died, and hung like tangled rat's-tail hair. The steps leading up to the broad front door were cracked, with weeds growing lushly up through the seams.

I parked my car, climbed out, and almost feared to slam the door. The place, for so large and solid a structure, felt precarious. No one appeared to have heard me arrive, so after a little hesitation I went crunching over the gravel and gingerly climbed the cracked stone steps. It was a hot, still summer's day—so windless that when I tugged on the tarnished old brass and ivory bell-pull I caught the ring of it, pure and clear, but distant, as if in the belly of the house. The ring was immediately followed by the faint, gruff barking of a dog.

The barks were very soon cut off, and for another long minute there was silence. Then, from somewhere to my right, I heard the scrape of an irregular footstep, and a moment later the son of the family, Roderick, appeared around the corner of the house. He squinted over at me with some suspicion, until noticing the bag in my hand. Drawing a collapsed-looking cigarette from his mouth he called, 'You're the doctor, are you? We were expecting Dr Graham.'

His tone was friendly enough, but had a touch of languor to it; as if he were bored by the sight of me already. I left the steps and went over to him, introducing myself as Graham's partner, explaining about Graham's emergency case. He answered blandly, 'Well, it's good of you to come out. On a Sunday, too; and such a filthy hot one. Come this way, would you? It's quicker than going right through the house. I'm Roderick Ayres, by the way.'

We had in fact met before, on more than one occasion. But he'd clearly forgotten that, and as we moved off he gave me his hand for a perfunctory shake. His fingers felt queer against mine, rough as crocodile in some spots, oddly smooth in others: his hands had been burned, I knew, in a wartime accident, along with a good part of his face. The scars aside, he was handsome: taller than me, but, at twenty-four, still boyish and slender. He was dressed boyishly too, in an open-necked shirt, summer trousers, and stained canvas shoes. He walked unhurriedly, and with a noticeable limp.

He said as we went, 'You know why we called you, I suppose?'

I said, 'I was told, for one of your maids.'

'*One* of our maids! I like that. There's only the one: our girl, Betty. Some stomach problem, it seems to be.' He looked dubious. 'I don't know. My mother, my sister and I tend to manage without doctors as a rule. We muddle through with colds and headaches. But I gather that neglecting the servants is a capital offence these days; they're to get better treatment than us, apparently. So we

thought we ought to send for someone. Watch your step just here, look.'

He had taken me along a gravelled terrace that ran the length of the north side of the Hall; he indicated a spot where the terrace had subsided, making for treacherous dips and cracks. I picked my way around them, interested to have been given a chance to see this side of the house—but aghast, again, at how badly the place had been allowed to decline. The garden was a chaos of nettle and bindweed. There was a faint but definite whiff of blocked drains. The windows we passed were streaked and dusty; all were closed, and most were shuttered, except for a pair of glass doors that stood open at the top of a set of flying stone steps wound about with convolvulus. They gave me a view of a large untidy room, a desk with a mess of papers on it, an edge of brocade curtain . . . That was all I had time to see. We had reached a narrow service doorway, and Roderick was standing aside to let me pass.

'Go on, would you?' he said, gesturing with one of his scarred hands. 'My sister's downstairs. She'll show you to Betty, and fill you in.'

Only later, recalling his injured leg, would I guess that he must not have wanted me to see him struggling with stairs. As it was, I thought his manner rather casual, and I went past him, saying nothing. At once, I heard him crunching quietly away in his rubber-soled shoes.

But I went quietly, myself. This narrow doorway, I had realised, was the one through which my mother had more or less smuggled me, all those years before. I remembered the bare stone stairway it led to, and, following the steps down, I found myself in the dim vaulted passage that had so impressed me then. But here was another disappointment. I had been picturing this passage as something like a crypt or a dungeon; in fact its walls were the glossy cream-and-green of police- and fire-stations, there was a strip of coconut matting on the flagstone floor, and a mop sat

sourly in a bucket. Nobody emerged to greet me, but to my right a half-open door offered a glimpse of the kitchen, so I went softly over and looked inside. Yet another damp squib: I found a large, lifeless room with Victorian counters and mortuary surfaces, all brutally scoured and scrubbed. Only the old deal table—the very table, by the look of it, where I had eaten my jellies and 'shapes'—recalled the excitement of that first visit. It was also the only thing in the room to bear any sign of activity, for there was a small pile of muddy vegetables put out on it, together with a bowl of water and a knife—the water discoloured, and the knife wet, as if someone had recently started the task and been called away.

I stepped back; and my shoe must have creaked, or scuffed against the coconut matting. There came again the gruff excited barking of a dog—alarmingly close, this time—and a second later an elderly black Labrador burst from somewhere into the passage and began hurtling towards me. I stood still with my bag raised while it barked and pranced around me, and soon a young woman appeared behind it, saying mildly, 'All right, you idiotic creature, that's enough! Gyp! Enough!—I'm so sorry.' She drew nearer, and I recognised Roderick's sister, Caroline. 'I can't bear a leaping dog, and he knows it. *Gyp*!' She reached forward to give him a swipe upon his haunches with the back of her hand; and at that he subsided.

'Little imbecile,' she said, tugging his ears with a look of indulgence. 'It's touching really. He thinks every stranger's come to cut our throats and make off with the family silver. We haven't the heart to tell him the silver's all been popped. I thought we were getting Dr Graham. You're Dr Faraday. We've never been properly introduced, have we?'

She smiled as she spoke, and offered me her hand. Her grip was firmer than her brother's had been, and more sincere.

I'd only ever seen her at a distance before, at county events, or on the streets of Warwick and Leamington. She was older than

Roderick, twenty-six or twenty-seven, and I'd regularly heard her referred to locally as 'rather hearty', a 'natural spinster', a 'clever girl'—in other words she was noticeably plain, over-tall for a woman, with thickish legs and ankles. Her hair was a pale English brown and might, with proper treatment, have been handsome, but I had never seen it tidy, and just now it fell drily to her shoulders, as if she had washed it with kitchen soap and then forgotten to comb it. Added to that, she had the worst dress sense of any woman I ever knew. She was wearing boyish flat sandals and a badly fitting pale summer dress, not at all flattering to her wide hips and large bosom. Her eyes were hazel, highly set; her face was long with an angular jaw, her profile flattish. Only her mouth, I thought, was good: surprisingly large, well-shaped, and mobile.

I explained again about Graham's emergency case and the call having been passed on to me. She said, as her brother had, 'Well, it's good of you to have come all this way. Betty hasn't been with us very long; less than a month. Her family live over on the other side of Southam, just too far for us to think of bothering them. The mother, anyway, is by all accounts a bit of a bad lot . . . She started complaining about her stomach last night, and when she seemed no better this morning, well, I thought we ought to make sure. Will you look at her right away? She's just up here.'

She turned as she spoke, moving off on her muscular legs, and the dog and I followed. The room she took me into was right at the end of the corridor, and might once, I thought, have been a housekeeper's parlour. It was smaller than the kitchen, but like the rest of the basement it had a stone floor and high, stunted windows, and the same drab institutional paint. There was a narrow grate, swept clean, a faded armchair and a table, and a metal-framed bed—the kind which, when not in use, can be folded and raised and tucked out of sight in a cavity in the

cupboard behind it. Lying beneath the covers of this bed, dressed in a petticoat or sleeveless nightdress, was a figure so small and slight I took it at first to be that of a child; looking closer, I saw it to be an undergrown teenage girl. She made an attempt to push herself up when she saw me in the doorway, but fell pathetically back against her pillow as I approached. I sat on the bed at her side and said, 'Well, you're Betty, are you? My name's Dr Faraday. Miss Ayres tells me you've had a tummy ache. How are you feeling now?'

She said, in a bad country accent, 'Please, Doctor, I'm awful poorly!'

'Have you been sick at all?'

She shook her head.

'Any diarrhoea? You know what that is?'

She nodded; then shook her head again.

I opened up my bag. 'All right, let's have a look at you.'

She parted her childish lips just far enough to let me slip the bulb of the thermometer under her tongue, and when I drew down the neck of her nightdress and set the chilly stethoscope to her chest, she flinched and groaned. Since she came from a local family, I had probably seen her before, if only to give her her school vaccination; but I had no memory of it now. She was an unmemorable sort of girl. Her colourless hair was bluntly cut, and fastened with a grip at the side of her forehead. Her face was broad, her eyes wide-spaced; the eyes themselves were grey and, like many light eyes, rather depthless. Her cheek was pale, only darkening slightly in a blush of self-consciousness when I put up her nightdress to examine her stomach, exposing her dingy flannel knickers.

As soon as I placed my fingers lightly on the flesh above her navel, she gave a gasp, crying out—almost screaming. I said soothingly, 'All right. Now, where does it hurt most? Here?'

She said, 'Oh! All over!'

'Does the pain come sharply, like a cut? Or is it more like an ache, or a burn?'

'It's like an ache,' she cried, 'with cuts all in it! But it's burning, too! Oh!' She screamed again, opening her mouth wide at last, revealing a healthy tongue and throat and a row of little crooked teeth.

'All right,' I said again, pulling her nightie back down. And after a moment's thought I turned to Caroline—who had been standing in the open doorway with the Labrador beside her, looking anxiously on—and said, 'Could you leave me alone with Betty for a minute, please, Miss Ayres?'

She frowned at the seriousness of my tone. 'Yes, of course.'

She made a gesture to the dog, and took him out into the passage. When the door was closed behind her I put away my stethoscope and thermometer, and closed my bag with a snap. I looked at the pale-faced girl and said quietly, 'Now then, Betty. This puts me in a ticklish position. For there's Miss Ayres out there, who's gone to an awful lot of trouble to try and make you better; and here am I, knowing for a fact that there's nothing at all I can do for you.'

She stared at me. I said more plainly, 'Do you think I don't have more important things to do on my day off than come chasing five miles out of Lidcote to look after naughty little girls? I've a good mind to send you to Leamington to have your appendix out. There's nothing wrong with you.'

Her face turned scarlet. She said, 'Oh, Doctor, there is!'

'You're a good actress, I'll give you that. All that screaming and thrashing about. But if I want play-acting, I'll go to the theatre. Who do you think's going to pay me now, hey? I don't come cheap, you know.'

The mention of money frightened her. She said with genuine anxiety, 'I *am* poorly! I *am*! I *did* feel sick last night. I felt sick horrible. And I thought—'

'What? That you'd like a nice day in bed?'

'No! You in't being fair! I *did* feel poorly. And I just thought—' And here her voice began to thicken, and her grey eyes filled with tears. 'I just thought,' she repeated, unsteadily, 'that if I was as poorly as that, then—then perhaps I ought to go home for a bit. Till I got better.'

She turned her face from me, blinking. The tears rose in her eyes, then ran in two straight lines down her little girl's cheeks. I said, 'Is that what this is all about? You want to go home? Is that it?'—and she put her hands across her face and cried properly.

A doctor sees lots of tears; some more affecting than others. I really did have a heap of chores at home, and was not at all amused to have been dragged away from them for nothing. But she looked so young and pathetic, I let her have the cry out. Then I touched her shoulder and said firmly, 'Come on now, that's enough. Tell me what the trouble is. Don't you like it here?'

She produced a limp blue handkerchief from under her pillow, and blew her nose.

'No,' she said, 'I don't.'

'Why not? Is the work too hard?'

She gave a hopeless shrug. 'The work's all right.'

'You don't do it all by yourself though, surely?'

She shook her head. 'There's Mrs Bazeley comes in, every day till three; every day bar Sunday. She does the washing and the cooking, and I does everything else. A man has a go at the gardens, sometimes. Miss Caroline does a bit . . .'

'That doesn't sound too bad.'

She didn't answer. So I pressed on. Did she miss her parents?—She pulled a face at that idea. Did she miss a boyfriend?—She pulled a worse face at that.

I picked up my bag. 'Well, I can't help you if you won't say.'

And seeing me start to rise, she said at last, 'It's just, this house!'

'This house? Well, what about it?'

'Oh, Doctor, it in't like a proper house at all! It's too big! You have to walk a mile to get anywhere; and it's so quiet, it gives you the creeps. It's all right in the daytimes, when I'm working, and Mrs Bazeley's here. But at night, I'm all on me own. There in't a sound! I have horrible dreams . . . And it wouldn't be so bad, but they make me go up and down that set of old back stairs. There's so many corners, and you don't know what's round 'em. I think I shall *die* of fright sometimes!'

I said, 'Die of fright? In this lovely house? You're lucky to have the chance to live here. Think of it like that.'

'Lucky!' she said in disbelief. 'All me friends say I'm mad to have gone into service. They laugh at me, at home! I never get to see no one. I never get to go out. Me cousins've all got factory jobs. And I could've had one, too—only, me dad won't let me! He don't like it. He says the factories make the girls too wild. He says I must stop here for a year first, and learn housework and nice ways. A year! I shall be dead of horror, I know I shall. Either that, or dead of shame. You ought to see the awful old dress and cap they makes me wear! Oh, Doctor, it in't fair!'

She had made a sodden ball of her handkerchief, and, as she spoke, threw it to the floor.

I leaned and picked it back up. 'Dear me, what a tantrum . . . A year will pass quickly, you know. When you're older, it'll seem like nothing.'

'Well, I in't old now, am I!'

'How old *are* you?'

'I'm fourteen. I might as well be ninety, stuck here!'

I laughed. 'Don't be silly, come on. Now, what are we going to do about this? I ought to earn my fee somehow, I suppose. Do you want me to say something to the Ayreses? I'm sure they don't want you to be unhappy.'

'Oh, they just want me to do me work.'

'Well, how about if I were to have a word with your parents?'

'That's a laugh! Me mam spends half her time out with other fellers; she don't care where I am. Me dad's useless. All he does is shout his head off. It's just shouting and rowing all day long. Then he turns round and takes me mam back, every time! He's only put me into service so I won't turn out like her.'

'Well, why on earth do you want to go home? You sound better off here.'

'I don't want to go *home*,' she said. 'I just— Oh, I'm just *fed up*!'

Her face had darkened, in pure frustration. She looked less like a child now, and more like some faintly dangerous young animal. But she saw me watching her, and the trace of temper began to fade. She grew sorry for herself again—sighing unhappily, and closing her swollen eyes. We sat for a moment without speaking, and I glanced around me at that drab, almost underground room. The silence was so pure, it felt pressurised: she was right, at least, about that. The air was cool, but curiously weighted; one was aware somehow of the great house above—aware, even, of the creeping chaos of nettle and weed that lay just beyond it.

I thought of my mother. She was probably younger than Betty when she first went out to Hundreds Hall.

I got to my feet. 'Well, my dear, I'm afraid we all have to put up with things we don't much care for, from time to time. That's called life; and there's no cure for it. But how about this? You stay in bed for the rest of the day, and we'll think of it as a holiday. I won't tell Miss Ayres that you've been shamming; and I'll send you out some stomach mixture—you can look at the bottle and remember how close you came to losing your appendix. But I *will* ask Miss Ayres if there isn't a way they can make things a bit more cheerful for you here. And meanwhile, you can give the place another chance. What do you say?'

She gazed at me for a second with her depthless grey eyes; then nodded. She said, in a pathetic whisper, 'Thank you, Doctor.'

I left her turning over in the bed, exposing the white nape of her neck and the small sharp blades of her narrow shoulders.

The passage was empty when I stepped into it, but, as before, at the sound of the closing door the dog started barking; there was a flurry of paws and claws and he came bowling out of the kitchen. But he came less frantically this time, and his excitement soon subsided, until he was happy to let me pat him and pull his ears. Caroline appeared in the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a tea-cloth—working the cloth between her fingers in a brisk, housewifely way. On the wall beyond her, I noticed, there was still that box of call-bells and wires: the imperious little machine designed to summon a staff of servants to the grander realm above.

'Everything all right?' she asked, as the dog and I moved towards her.

I said without hesitation, 'Some slight gastric trouble, that's all. Nothing serious, but you were quite right to call me in. One can't be too careful with stomach problems, especially in this weather. I'll send you over a prescription, and you might as well go easy on her for a day or two . . . But there's one other thing.' I had reached her side now, and lowered my voice. 'I get the idea she's pretty homesick. That hasn't struck you?'

She frowned. 'She's seemed all right so far. She'll need time to settle in, I suppose.'

'And she sleeps down here at night, I gather, all on her own? That must be lonely for her. She mentioned a set of back stairs, said she finds them creepy—'

Her look cleared, grew almost amused. 'Oh, *that*'s the trouble, is it? I thought she was above nonsense like that. She seemed a sensible enough thing when she first came out here. But you can never tell with country girls: they're either hard as nails, wringing chickens' necks and so on; or going off into fits, like Guster. I expect she's seen too many unpleasant films. Hundreds is quiet, but there's nothing queer about it.'