

Iris



During those last days, before she becomes too weak, she finds she remembers it all once more, piercingly clearly. As if to die, she has to live through it again. So much of it is pain, the pain that has burned within her since she was very little.

So she writes it down, though her hands are slow and stupid, the letters childlike, and the doltish nurse looking after her keeps interrupting to ask if she wants a drink or her hand held. *Leave me alone, you fool*, she wants to shout, but her voice has stopped working so she smiles instead and they think she is wonderful.

‘Isn’t she wonderful,’ Carole says, sobbing over her. They all think she’s wonderful.

She writes it down – why? So they will understand? So they will know the truth? She does not know why she writes it down. But she remembers. Everything.

1922



Her mother's hands stroking her pale hair, how soft it always felt, a caress every time.

'It's my house; I don't see why I should give it up.'

'Fane is not your house, darling. It belongs to your Uncle Clive and he will live here when he returns. If he returns.'

She likes the idea of an uncle. She has read a book where a little girl has an uncle who brings her sweets and a bird's nest and they are jolly together.

'When will Uncle Clive come back?'

'I don't know, darling. No one knows.'

She remembers, too, the kiss her mother drops onto her forehead, the words she uses.

'We must be very kind to your uncle when he does return. He has suffered a great deal. It will be a terrible shock for him, to return after so long, to have to take up the reins, learn how to run everything.'

She remembers the milky panes of glass in the little room that was hers above the monumental portico, which always felt to her like the entrance to a vast temple. She had been to the British Museum last year. She was only eight years old and had stood still and stared for what seemed like hours at the statues, pillars and gateways of civilisations buried in the sand for centuries, uncovered and carried across the sea to London. The mystical carved griffins, five times her height, that once stood guard at the gates of the fabled city of Nimrud. The crumbling panels showing the emperor hunting lions, the arrow piercing the flesh, their huge paws like kittens, the dying fall. I live in a palace too, she wanted to say to the tweedy little man next to her, staring in awe at the ancient marble. Only it is not thousands of miles away. I came up by train, this morning. It is a terrifying, wonderful place. It is my home. It is called Fane Hall.

She considers what she should give this uncle of hers who will come from Canada, the other side of the world. She was only five when her father

died, in the last days of the war, 1918. She remembers his last visit home quite well: his large bristling moustache, the feel of his hands as he hugged her tightly when she sat on his knee. He smelt of pipe tobacco and spicy aftershave. He liked to drop kisses on her hair, and whisper in her ear. 'My brother had eyelashes like yours as a child, dearest. Sandy white. Just the same.' She remembers the sound of the horn of the car that came to take him back to war. How he got up, cupping her head in his large hand that last time. She will always remember that. She hates car horns.

It is often lonely growing up at Fane. She is the only child, apart from the boots boy who is three years older than her. But when she says she is lonely Mrs Dennis, the cook, tells Iris she must not be so difficult, for she is a lucky girl. She, Mrs Dennis, is very busy and does not have time for her whining. She hears Mrs Dennis whispering about her to one of the maids. 'Nasty white eyelashes. Sneaks around pretending to play, but she's a sly little thing. Watch out for her.'

She is happiest outside, where she can watch the stars, the birds, mark the seasons, hear the wind in the trees of the woods beyond the park. In summer, the sound of the breeze ruffling the leaves is like whispering, and in winter it bends the bare branches and makes them howl. She loves the blancmange-pink dog roses in the hedgerows that in autumn become jewel-coloured rosehips of ruby and garnet. She watches the swifts as they swoop over the long, waving grasses of the parkland, squealing and curling. She has a dormouse as a pet, and one winter a quite tame robin who flies to her windowsill every morning looking for the crumbs she sweeps into her pinafore to save for him. Nanny Pargeter clucks her under the chin when she discovers her doing this in the kitchen garden one afternoon. 'Nasty, dirty habit. You must try harder, Lady Iris. Remember you are your father's daughter.'

She tries not to be naughty. Often, she doesn't understand things. Often, without meaning to be, she is naughty, and is scolded, and Nanny Pargeter will take a slipper to her. She understands she is very lucky to live there, to have the honour of looking after the house for her father until Uncle Clive gets here, lucky to live here when millions are poor and starving and had no clothing and heating in the long winter just past. When soldiers who fought for their country are begging on the streets, their ragged uniforms where their legs or arms once were tucked into their jackets. When the map of Europe that Miss Gulling, her governess, shows her most mornings up in the Star Study has scribbles all over it from where she has crossed out countries,

written new ones in – ‘Yougoslavia’ – in a careful hand. When so much lies in ruins.

Miss Gulling travelled extensively before the war, in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France, and she tells her stories of schlosses and ancient countesses and mountains so high you cannot see the tops because they are in the clouds. Miss Gulling evidently had a Life before she came to Fane Hall to teach little Lady Iris Fane. She believes Germany has been humiliated by the terms of the peace agreement and must rise again. She says Germany should have been invited to participate in the Olympics, that their boys would have beaten Abrahams hands down, that Abrahams isn’t a true Englishman. She says: ‘Germany will be strong again – you wait and see.’

Iris’s mother was most careful to appoint the right person. She is careful about everything to do with appearance: her daughter’s clothes are ordered from Harrods, her night things from the Army & Navy arriving swathed in tissue paper, then carefully altered by Nanny; her deportment is regularly corrected, hours spent sitting on a chair, walking the corridor with her small shoulders flung back lest she should be round-shouldered; as for her friends, there are none, as she might not be mixing with the right people, and the new Lord Earl Ashley might not approve of sending her to school to mix with common girls. ‘We do not know what your uncle will think is best for you when he returns.’

When he returns. This is what they always say.

One day she says: ‘What does he have to do with it?’

Nanny Pargeter, folding clothes in the corner of the nursery on the top floor, along the corridor from the Star Study: ‘Naughty child, how impertinent you are. He is the head of the family, and he will say what happens to you.’

‘That’s enough, Nanny. Oh, Iris darling, you do look dreadful, so bedraggled. Have you brushed your hair?’

Iris is drooping with tiredness, but she says: ‘Yes, Mama. One hundred and fifty times.’

Everything must be properly done. Yes, she is fortunate.

Nanny Pargeter, Mrs Dennis the cook, Miss Gulling the governess and her mother – her life is ordered by these four women, and the grounds of Fane, which is her own world. She knows every inch of it, and she is clever, so she remembers what she is told. The black marble statues, one of Hermes, the other of Cassandra, greeting visitors as they cross into the

vast hall. She loves Greek myths, like her father, her mother tells her, and his father and all the way back to the first Earl Ashley. Her favourite, of course, is the Odyssey, with men turned into pigs, and magic, and witches, and one-eyed men. And Penelope and Telemachus, waiting for Odysseus to come home.

She knows she is a disappointment, twice over. She should have been a boy, and she is not a boy. Then, she should have been a pretty girl and she is not; she is plain, like a monkey, if a monkey had pale eyelashes, pale hair, pale skin, and asked too many questions. She knows adults don't like her. She sees their assessment in their eyes when she is wheeled out if visitors come to call, trussed up in her petticoats and pinafores, hair twisted into curls that never sit quite right.

Fane Hall is a long, flat-fronted mansion built in the late eighteenth century, with an East and West Wing which curl out from the frontage towards a kitchen garden and a stable block. At the centre of the house is the portico, protruding, a vast stone canopy with six Corinthian pillars, as tall as the British Museum's, upon which rests a pediment flaking with age and a frieze of carved classical objects – a vase, an oak, a sun – running the length of the portico, which casts the central hall into darkness.

Once, it was the finest house in Sussex, perhaps in southern England. Now it is slowly, gently, falling apart. She knows her dear mother cannot manage it all. She is not the sort who ever could, not like the stiff-backed great ladies who come to call on her mother and patronise her, who should have lived at Fane, who would know what to do.

Her parents met because her father saw her mother playing at Wigmore – in those days still known as Bechstein – Hall. He carried her cello back that night for her, through the streets of Marylebone. Her mother didn't know for several weeks that the gentle, kind man she called first Mr Fane, then Arthur, who alternately waited outside for her after every performance or left bouquets at the stage door of violets, then roses and notes in looping handwriting on thick, creamy paper, was an earl, Lord Ashley, of storied, glittering Fane Hall. Her mother, the daughter of unworldly middle-class artisans, simply had not understood what marrying a man like that would entail. She says this once to her daughter, with a little laugh, and Iris knows what this means, and she never says it again.

Lady Ashley cannot do accounts, or 'deal' with Mrs Boyes, the new housekeeper, or discuss poaching with the gamekeeper, or organise committees for the purpose of Good Works. She knows what an elegy is, and how

to reach fourth position, how to master a Beethoven sonata. But she tries so hard: Iris sees her weeping as she attempts to knit socks for the poor, and cannot get her hands to work, her slender, clever hands that can play anything, but, God bless her, absolutely cannot knit.

Increasingly, her mother is only happy when she is practising, up on the top floor. The deep, melancholy sound of the cello reverberates through the house. It echoes across the empty rooms, bouncing off dusty chandeliers and the wooden shutters, most of which are fastened tight shut these days. Iris knows there is no money, that her father has gambled much of it away, and she knows the house is dying, and yet she loves it passionately, to her bones, this connection to her darling, kind father, who lies now in Belgium, his grave untended, unseen by anyone who knew him. There are many little things that will pain her throughout her life, words and sounds that stab behind the eyes and hurt her head in the course of the day: Belgium. Car horns. Cellos. Hand-knitted socks. Fathers. Fathers.

But she doesn't see any of that – not yet. She knows only that Uncle Clive will return, and then the house will come alive again.

So they pass, the days and nights, engulfing her like snowdrifts in winter, clouds of dust and seed in summer. Two women, waiting for someone else to come and live in their house.

August 2020



‘How extraordinary,’ said Sarah Forster, coming into the large, cluttered kitchen. ‘You’ll never guess what’s happened.’

Gently she moved the mess on the kitchen table – a packet of seeds, two coffee mugs, a pile of junk mail, an old bowl filled with dead biro, unsharpened pencils, rusty paperclips and coins – out of the way, and dropped a package onto the table.

‘Barnard Castle’s banned day-trippers,’ said her daughter, Friday.

‘Not yet.’ Sarah unhooked a mug from the dresser, touching the warped old wood, as she did every morning, saying the words she said only to herself each day. *Good morning, all souls in this house.*

She poured herself a coffee, wrapping her aching fingers round the warming china, and winced: her hands were bad today.

Her heart was racing. She tried to ignore it, to breathe.

‘I heard the doorbell go,’ said her granddaughter Esmé, leaning forward and tapping the package. ‘So it must be something from the postman. That facemask I ordered for you from Etsy’s arrived.’

‘No, it was for me. And I’m not wearing a facemask that says “Gotta Blame It on My Juice” even if it means I get fined,’ said Sarah. She smiled at Esmé, but Friday saw the puckered line on her forehead.

‘What is it, Mum?’

Sarah sank down onto the ancient kitchen chair, which creaked alarmingly; everything in the house was, like her, ancient. She gave a small laugh, and pulled the package towards her. ‘It’s the strangest thing. This has arrived from Vic.’

‘Who?’

‘My sister,’ she said to her granddaughter. ‘You’ve never met her.’

‘You have a sister?’ Esmé put her phone down; she even managed to look vaguely interested.

Sarah knew her daughter was watching her. ‘Yes.’ She moved the fruit bowl, then the keys, ineffectually. ‘But we – Well, I haven’t seen her for years.’

‘Did you fall out?’

Sarah looked down at her coffee, as if surprised she was still holding it. She was silent for a long time. ‘Not really,’ she said eventually. ‘It’s – sometimes it’s easier not to see people any more.’

She traced Vic’s address on the back of the jiffy bag with one stiff finger, the diamonds and sapphires on her engagement ring glinting in the late summer light. Then, briskly, she ripped open the package, gingerly removing a thick, battered pamphlet, its staples brown with ancient rust. ‘*Stargazing: A Guide for Beginners*’ it said across the front in a crisp 1950s san serif font.

Oh, where was Daniel?

‘Stargazing,’ said Esmé. ‘Grandad would like that.’

‘I was given it,’ Sarah said. ‘A long time ago, by –’ and her voice faltered.

A sheaf of papers, folded inside the pamphlet, slid out. The first sheet, a letter.

‘*Dear Sarah,*’ she read out loud.

‘I trust you are well and have survived these last few months relatively unscathed. All is well here in Ingotsbam, though quiet without Robert, who died last year.

‘She never told me,’ she said, looking up. ‘Oh, poor Vic.’

Her fingers were trembling. She pressed them to her lips, eyes scanning the page as she read to herself, rapidly.

How are you? How is life in The Row? I am pleased to see that you are still there (how wonderful that you, like me, are still in the phone book). Are you still playing? Is Daniel still alive? I hope he, and the girls are well too.

I am writing after all this time as the trustees of Fane have been in

touch. They are reopening the house to visitors, after all this time, and would like to invite us to attend a ceremony there in August.

It seems that during the lockdown the warden undertook an inventory, and found some boxes in the attic. They have been there for decades, ever since Iris died, I suppose. There was also this pamphlet, under the bed she died in. It must have been there for decades. I thought you would want it.

She also found these papers, an account of Uncle Clive's arrival at Fane and Iris's early years. Her health was failing but it is very clear to me it is our mother's handwriting.

I didn't know what to do, and then I realised after what has happened with the pandemic over the past six months it is ridiculous to have this silence between us. I didn't telephone or write to you about Robert. I wanted to tell you. But I couldn't bear your sympathy. I knew you would understand my pain. No one else does. I think we've come to believe we've always worked best at arm's length. But . . . oh well, life is too short, Sarah. If the last few months have taught me anything it's that. I don't want to end up like her. I can't.

Don't worry: I'm not asking to be best friends.

But we were best friends, though, Sarah found herself thinking, and her breathing grew laboured, her eyes pricking with unbearably painful tears. You were my world, Vic, and I loved you so much.

She read the rest, her voice soft.

Read what she has written. I wonder what you make of it? It changes everything, if it is true. (And I think it is true.)

I said to you once that I think of the past now, that is to say our childhood, as rather like living with wolves. Everything was so chaotic, so terrifying, so confusing. The wolves were at the door and we ended up eating ourselves instead of making them disappear.

Anyway – read it.

With my love.

Your sister,

Victoria

x

Sarah stood up, and pushed her chair out of the way. ‘Excuse me,’ she said, nodding. ‘I’ll – I’ll just –’

‘Is she revealing all the family secrets, Gran? Is she going to have you cancelled?’ Esmé offered, but Sarah simply smiled and left the room.

Friday, who had said nothing all this time, frowned at her daughter.

‘Leave Granny alone for a bit,’ she said. ‘She doesn’t like to talk about what it was like, growing up.’

‘Why?’

Friday stared at the kitchen door, which was banging in the wake of her mother’s exit. ‘You learn how to be a parent based on what happened to you. Granny – Well, given what she’s told me, I’m amazed she made it out alive. I’m amazed I did too. You have no idea what she went through. I don’t think she fully understands it, either. Oh dear –’ She gazed around the kitchen, the absence of both parents keenly felt. ‘What’s happened, I wonder?’

The sound of her mother’s cello echoing through the house drifted down the stairs. ‘We should both leave her for a while,’ said Friday, tidying up the breakfast things. ‘Let’s go back to the flat today, Es. We were only meant to stay here for a month or so. And it’s been nearly six months.’

‘It’s been great, though,’ said Esmé awkwardly. ‘I didn’t want to come here . . . I thought it’d be awful. Now I don’t want to leave.’

‘Well, me either.’ Friday gazed out of the window into the little garden at the dark quince tree where the fruits hung high up, still small, tight, pale green. ‘I love being back here. We were lucky, you know. But it’s not our house, Es.’

‘No, it’s much nicer.’ Friday laughed. ‘Oh, Mum, let’s stay a bit longer. Just till we go on holiday. If we get to go, that is.’

‘All right. I’ll see what happens. See what’s in the package Vic sent her today. It might change things.’ Friday was silent, listening to the cello, the plaintive, sweet notes that hung in the still summer air. She glanced down at the letter, still on the table.

‘The wolves were at the door,’ she said after a while, quietly, almost to herself. ‘Poor Mum. Poor Vic.’

Esmé shrugged. She was fifteen and the past – Well, it was simply that, wasn’t it? Dead, and buried. She bit into her toast, looked back down at her phone.