

## Chapter One

*An Indian household can no more be governed peacefully without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire.*

*The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook,*  
Flora Annie Steel & Grace Gardiner

To my house at number three Victoria Drive the world outside is foreign. The gap between the inside of the house and what blurs past outside has been growing steadily throughout recent years until everything beyond the walls seems loud and staccato and completely out of time. Oh it is all whirring roads, fast-changing channels and quick shifts of sense so sudden there's not a hope of finding a meaning in any of it. Oh it is all people darting and quivering with busyness, leaving every sentence half finished. Oh it is all in pieces. It is all simply shards.

The house has to hold out against this small Britain, which has become so lax, and its unsteady world, which whirrs so. My house has to make a stand. It has to stand tall and upright with all its separate rooms. With its walls made of good brick from the days when brick was made right, its clean

sash windows over which blinds are perpetually hung, and its door, painted with black gloss, with which the house says, in its own way, *do not come in*. Although I barely ever use the door, I know that still, at the foot of it, a brush doormat lies. On the doormat it simply says 'Home' in small stern letters. And perhaps it's this that finally discourages the legions of those fidgeting people from the world outside to trespass up the path. For no one visits the house.

No one save the girls in their yellow uniforms. The house can't escape them; they come on professional business.

We're in the bathroom. The new girl, Susheela, tugs hard at my knickers to get them down over the thickened legs.

'Sorry, Magda,' she says.

'You should be.'

This is the first time we've been to the toilet together. I have tried, since she arrived on the scene, to avoid going with her. When I go with them, we must talk. I'm still unable to accustom myself to listening to the flow of urine in the presence of someone else, and so must make conversation.

'So you're Susheela, are you?'

'Yes, Su-shee-la,' the girl says now. A slight smile; she's surprised and perhaps pleased that I know her name at all, I can tell. We have exchanged few words on her previous visits.

'Did I say it incorrectly?' I know I didn't.

'No.'

'Then why choose to repeat it in that idiotic fashion?'

She laughs. Surprised, is she?

'Sorry,' she says. 'Didn't mean to offend.'

'Takes more than that, my girl.'

DIGNITY

I cannot think of what she's presently doing, and so we must continue.

'Where are you from?' I ask. The other one was from Delhi, the other Indian girl, who lasted only one visit and was gone back out into the blur.

'Just down the road,' she says. 'Bay's Mouth.' Her soft voice fills the bathroom.

She has a North Indian look about her. Yes. I press it away, the longing, try to shut the door on it. But it's come in, settled down and put its feet up. Damn this girl. Ever since she turned up she's bothered me like a bite that won't settle.

Once she has me all back in order she wheels the chair out past the dressing table. I stroke the wood of it as we pass. When I could stand and walk alone, on my own path, I would linger here, beside it, the teak of the dressing table smooth and cool, like a young face. If you look into it for long enough, into the almost imperceptible grain, you can see it. The heat. And you can feel that this wood was once rooted. Touching it, you can watch white storks pick across a grove. Feel the dry air in your mouth. And hear it. The thick air. The sound of it. The hum and muster of Bengal.

The girl pushes my unlistening chair on and on through the house, at whoever's pace but mine. Into the living room. Under the clock.

Then she comes round to the front of my chair, and looks at me.

Damn it.

Damn it, I can't escape seeing the world in their expressions, the ones that come. That world in pieces. And them, in pieces. There's part of them here, with me, changing my

blouse, or running my stockings up the varicosed legs like pulling over a shroud. And part of them elsewhere, in several elsewheres: clocking in, clocking out, checking the messages on their small black phones, driving, braking, driving, making microwave dinners and watching the TV channels change. You can't help feeling sorry for them, the ones that come to care.

Sometimes I wonder where it is in them, that part of a person that needs to be separate and bounded, needs to be itself alone and set within its own confines.

I've even asked them. 'What do you do to come to yourself?' I asked the fat one last week, meaning *How do you wind all this down? How do you survive it?* And she looked at me and laughed, and then looked at me again, lost a demi-second before saying, 'This and that,' and some other obfuscating tattle.

What they do, I realise from hearing them talk to each other at the changing of the guard, is have a glass of wine, and then another and another, and sink into it. Forgetting. Their many parts sagging, and still apart.

I frighten them by asking these kinds of questions. Their only recourse is to behave as though I am as idiotic as I look.

'Oh, Magda,' says the short one almost every time she comes. 'Are you in one of your moods again?' Which is enough to make me want to belt her across the face.

Or, 'Oh, Magda. You do make me laugh.' The more reasonable, tall one.

Or – the most patronising square woman with the black hair – 'Magda, are you causing trouble again?'

Which I am. I most emphatically am.

DIGNITY

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‘Coffee?’

I don’t answer.

‘Would you like coffee?’

‘I should think you could check your chart and see if it’s time,’ I say.

She’s looking at me in that incredulous, blank way.

‘What do you mean?’

‘A timetable for everything now, isn’t there?’ I smooth my skirt as I sit. ‘Shouldn’t think it matters if I want it; I shall have it.’

‘But do you want it?’

‘Does it matter?’ I look up at her.

‘It matters to me, Magda.’ That small smile, as she says it, my Christian name.

My bones feel it, the way she’s looking at me. Pity, is it? Is it? I look her in the eye, this new Indian girl, and make myself as upright as I can in the chair, stacking my vertebrae again, tall.

‘And are you of any importance?’ I say, as haughtily as my position allows.

She leaves me here, under the clock, and goes to the kitchen.

My name, I have tried to tell them, is Mrs Compton. I have a degree in Chemistry. I could once mix element with element and produce clouds of red vermilion, yellow cadmium, cobalt blue. I could write out a formula so correct that it sang. I could measure and weigh and make an equation balance, make it stand most properly to attention. I am all a balancing

act, though lately I am having trouble, and my legs will no longer let me stand.

But my house stands.

My house has to stake its place against them. It has to hold out more stubbornly even than the old, declining hotels along the seafront at Bay's Mouth, hotels called the British, the Burlington, the Palace, the Imperial, which have none of my discipline, and whose bones are more crumbled by dry rot than mine. Sandwiched between the new, brash seafront, with its stark, freshly built guest house called the Colonial and the frightful tower blocks which rise to the back of me, wholly beyond the pale, my house is upright and still proper. I enjoy their discomfort at it, these women contracted to care. They're uncomfortable in my grand house, like peanuts in a chocolate box.

And then this one, Susheela, who I can sense pacing now, in my kitchen, like a flutter in my belly. She has that dignity about her that Anwar had. I value that. Dignity in a person who serves.

I wait a long time. There is the clock. There is me under it. Waiting under all that time.

Around me the furniture and ornaments and belongings tell a story, if any of them could be still enough to listen.

The beginning is this photograph of Mother, sitting, despite my anger at it, on the mantelpiece still. A sepia print, faded at the edges, and over-exposed to the bright Indian sun. Simply a wide expanse of lawn, blank canvas, and her at its centre. In the middle of the picture she sits, in a wicker chair, her feet tucked to the side, knees together, carefully,

DIGNITY

carefully. If any of these girls that come could be bothered to look at the photograph for any length of time, they might feel how she smoothed out that skirt a split-second before the shutter opened, how she brushed any fragments of disarray from her shoulders, shooed the servants from the frame, shifted her posture, drew herself more upright and took on that accusatory look, taut around the anger that kept her in place. It keeps me in place still.

By the time I knew her she was either Mrs Benedict Worsal Compton or simply Memsahib. But on the back of the picture her name is written: Evelyn Roberts. My mother.

The story continues in this houseful of heavy wooden furniture, which were our packing cases once, to come Home with. On the back it still says our name, stamped on the chest of drawers, the underside of the dressing table, the underbelly of the wardrobe. It was the only way we were allowed to bring that much good wood Home. There were quotas. India was finally clawing back its assets. And wood was one. So you had to turn your exquisite furniture into cases for the ship, and then back into furniture for Home. I remember my blind rage when the furniture at the end, at Home, did not match what we'd had in our grand residence in Kharagpur. The furniture was not the only thing that didn't emerge from that journey intact.

See. The house tells a story, tells it through from beginning to end. This end. And over my dead body will there be anything after.

The girl doesn't come back. I listen for her. Has she left? She hasn't given me my pills. I need my pills. I listen for her. Yes.

ALYS CONRAN

In the kitchen I can hear her sniffing, and then the low sound of sobbing.

Already? I'll get rid of her soon enough, will I? Damn her, and damn this longing. I wait with the grandfather clock. Another thing that's whole. Its solid ticking keeps the house in order, keeps the presence of time here and keeps me sitting under it, under the pressure of the unifying tick and tock. Not the kind of time that separates, one minute from another, one hour, one shift, as time exists for these girls. No, this time is different; it binds, roots, links one second to the next, one age, one place to another. And the dead to the living.