

The Stranger House

Reginald Hill

Published by HarperCollins

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

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

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

HarperCollins *Publishers*
77-85 Fulham Palace Road, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins 2005

1

Copyright © Reginald Hill 2005

Reginald Hill asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 00 719481 1
ISBN 0 00 719482 X (trade paperback)

Set in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

My people

On July 8th, 1992, a small girl woke up in her bed in her family house in the Australian state of Victoria and knew exactly who she was.

Samantha Flood, known to her friends as Sam and her family as Sammy, only child of Sam and Louisa Flood, granddaughter of Vince and Ada Flood, who between them had turned a patch of scrubby farmland on the fringe of the Goulburn Valley into the Vinada Winery which by the end of the eighties was winning golden opinions and medals to match at wine shows up to and including the Royal National Capital.

That morning Sam also knew two new things.

Today she was eleven years old and she was bleeding.

The bleeding was a shock. Not because Sam didn't know what it was. Her ma had explained it all years back, and she'd been taught stuff at school, and the lesson had been complete when her best friend, Martie Hopkins, started not long after she turned ten.

Ten was early. Martie was proud of being the first in their class, just like she was proud of the rest that came early too, the boobs and the bush. Sam was a skinny little thing, not just flat but practically concave. Martie, complacent in her new roundness, once joked in the school showers that you could

serve soup on Sam's chest. Sam retorted that at least she wasn't a fat-arse, but secretly she envied Martie. They were always competing for top of the class and neither cared to see the other ahead in anything.

So the bleeding wasn't altogether unwelcome, but on her birthday it seemed lousy timing.

She called to her mother, who came into the bedroom and soon put things right, both inside and out. Lu Flood had a great talent for putting things right. As she sorted her daughter out, she remarked that some of *my people* reckoned it was lucky to start on your birthday. Lu had worked out she was one-seventh Aboriginal and there weren't many situations she hadn't got a bit of *my people* wisdom for. Her husband just grinned and said she made most of it up, while Sam, who loved playing around with numbers, worked out you couldn't be one-seventh something anyway, you had to be half or a quarter or an eighth, because everyone had two parents and four grandparents and so on.

It made no difference to Lu. One-seventh she was, which was a good proportion, seven being a lucky number, and Sam was one-fourteenth, which was twice as lucky.

Maths apart, Sam quite liked all this weird stuff her mother spouted about *my people*. It made her feel connected with that great emptiness outside her bedroom window. And if it got scary, which it did sometimes, the one-seventh (or one-fourteenth) weirdness was more than balanced by the comfortable certainties she got from her father's side of the family.

She used to stagger to Gramma Ada with her great heavy leather-bound photo album and ask to be told about the folk whose faces stared out at her. She liked it best when they got to the old sepia photos where the men had beards or heavy moustaches and the women wore long dresses and everyone looked like they'd been shot and taken to a taxidermist. Gramma knew all their names, all their stories.

With history like this, Sam knew for certain who she was,

so it didn't matter when Ma's stories got a bit frightening, there was nothing in them that those old sepia men with their big moustaches and unblinking stares couldn't deal with.

That morning as Lu cleaned Sam up, she recalled that up north where *my people* came from, when a girl started bleeding, she had to live by herself for a month or so, lying face-down in a hut so she couldn't see the sun, because if she did, her nose would go rotten.

'So there you are, Sam,' she said when she'd finished. 'Your choice. You can either head out to the old brewhouse and lie flat for a few weeks, or you can take your chances, come downstairs and open your prezzies.'

So, no choice. And no change except that Sam was eleven and on a level with Martie.

She had a great day, ate as much chocolate as she liked, which was a hell of a lot, and got to stay up late, watching the telly.

There was only one thing to watch, which was a play everyone had been talking about called *The Leaving of Liverpool*. Sam would have preferred something that had promise of a bit more life in it, but her mother and Gramma Ada wanted to see the play, so that's what they settled down to. Except for her pa. He said he had to check some new vines. If it wasn't cricket or Aussie footie, Pa didn't give a toss for television.

The play (as Sam explained it later to her friends) was about a bunch of English kids who got sent to Australia because they were orphans or at least their parents didn't want them and there was some scheme here to look after them and see they got a proper education. Except it didn't work out like that. They got treated rotten. Worse than rotten in some cases. They got treated like slaves.

It was late when Sam went up to bed but she couldn't sleep. She lay there thinking about the play, and it all got mixed up with the bleeding somehow, and for the first time ever she had a sense of herself as something separate from her context.

Up till now she'd been Samantha Flood who lived with her ma and her gramma at the winery run by her pa and they all loved her. She went to school, she had a lot of friends, she wasn't all that pretty but everyone said she had the loveliest red hair they'd ever seen. And she was really bright, particularly at sums. There was no place further away than Melbourne, no time longer than the months between now and Christmas, nothing sadder in recent years than the death of her kitten, Tommo, who got run over by one of the big drays, and nothing surer than that if anyone was going to live happy ever after with nothing much changing, that person was little Sam Flood.

That was Sam on the inside looking out. That night, the night of her eleventh birthday, for the very first time she found herself on the outside looking in.

It all had something to do with the play she'd seen on the telly. It went round and round in her head till finally she felt like she'd been in it. She realized for the first time just how small she was and that there were things out there bigger even than the dray must have looked to Tommo, which could roll over her and not notice, could pick her up and in the twinkling of an eye drop her on to a boat sailing to the other side of the world.

Finally she fell asleep and when she woke it was light and she felt more like her old self again. When she drew back the curtains and saw the sun, she wondered for a moment if maybe her nose would go rotten, but didn't really worry about it.

That night they showed the second half of the play. Ma tried to send her to bed at her normal time, but Sam chucked a berko and declared she was going to watch whatever anybody said. Her mother yelled after Pa who'd done his usual exit act, and he came back, listened to his wife, looked at his daughter for a moment then said, 'Let her watch.'

He never wasted words. Use more than six in a sentence, he thought you were yacking.

Other people got worked up by the play too. Next day the

papers were full of it. Sam, after another disturbed night, tried talking about it with her friends, but none of them had seen it, and when she started telling the story, Martie Hopkins stole her thunder by saying, sort of throw-away, ‘Oh yeah, I know all about those migrant kids. My Aunt Gracie that married Ma’s brother, Uncle Trev, she was one of them.’

That was Martie’s public way of getting back for being knocked off her perch as the only kid in their class to have started her periods. But when privately Sam confided the weird ideas which had started swirling around in her mind, Martie was reassuringly dismissive, saying she’d felt something like that herself when the curse started but it soon wore off.

And she was right. The play was good for a bit of indignation – and Sam was top of the heap when it came to indignation – but soon she found something else to get worked up about. And once she and her mates turned teens, all that stuff on her eleventh birthday got mixed up with everything else that was happening inside and out.

Not that much appeared to be happening outside in Sam’s case. At nineteen on her way to Melbourne University she was still the same slight and skinny figure she’d been at eleven. Maybe you could no longer have served soup on her, but prawn cocktail would have taken its time sliding off. If you cared to look deep into her eyes, which not many people did because the intense concentration of her gaze tended to make them feel uneasy, you might be struck by their colouring which was at the slatey end of blue. But the greater part of her adolescent growth and vitality seemed to have gone into her hair which she carried around like a volcanic eruption on top of a match-stick.

As for inside, she knew the world was a much stranger place than she’d once thought, but alongside the rock of her family on which her two small feet were so securely planted she had discovered a shining ivory tower whose staircase spiralled to the stars. Mathematics. By ten she was doing the family accounts

and not long afterwards her pa was using her to double-check the Vinada books. But already it was clear that her abilities went far beyond mere book-keeping. Any disappointment her ma and pa felt that she was lost to the family business they kept to themselves, and it was with their blessing and encouragement that she went off to university after a gap year which (unlike Martie who spent it jetting around Europe in the company of well-heeled boyfriends) she devoted to exploring Australia.

Now to the established certainty of her own identity and her growing confidence that anything that couldn't be explained by mathematics probably wasn't worth explaining was added a proud assurance that she lived in one of the most varied and fascinating countries in the world. At that point in her life she could see no reason why she should ever want to leave it.

At university she quickly established herself as one of the brightest maths students of her year. Nor was there any question of geekiness. She worked hard, but huge natural ability plus an eidetic memory meant she had plenty of time to do all the other things a student ought to do, like getting hammered, and getting a sun-tan, and getting laid, as well of course as getting mad. The first three she did most frequently in the company of another brilliant maths student till his chosen specialist path of cryptography got him recruited by government men so anonymous even their suits had no labels. His fatal error was to try and impress Sam by telling her there were things in his work he could no longer discuss with her, upon which Sam completed the square and got very mad indeed, telling him that maths was about running naked through the streets, yelling *Eureka!*, not whispering behind closed doors with faceless spooks.

After that for a while she opined that men were a waste of space, except for her pa whom she loved, and her granpa Vince whom she remembered with love, and a visiting professor from

Cambridge, UK, whose mind she loved, and any young man at a party who didn't believe he was God's gift, supported the Demons, and could make her laugh.

So on she wandered towards her inevitable First, more certain than ever who she was and where she was going, and never suspecting, for all her analytical brilliance and eidetic memory, that she was ignoring a message she'd started to hear all those years ago on her eleventh birthday which began in blood and ended in nightmare.