
Opening Extract from...

Pre-War House

Written by Alison Moore

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Alison Moore

The Pre-War House

and other stories

CROMER

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For Dan and Arthur

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The Pre-War House

and other stories

WHEN THE DOOR CLOSED, IT WAS DARK

In England, it will be autumn. She imagines the paling sun and the purifying chill, the bare branches and the fallen leaves and the smell of decomposition, the smell of the end of the summer. She longs for short days and early nights, wanting home and hibernation.

She steps from the concrete slabs on to the iron staircase and begins the climb up. She can hardly bear the weight she is carrying, and the rising sun beats down on her.

She remembers her first sight of this place. The taxi, air-conditioned and smelling of pine trees, pulled away, leaving her standing on the slabs beside the block of flats. The paintwork was bruise-coloured and blistered. The midday heat was terrific. There was one flat on each floor, the higher storeys accessed by the iron staircase which zigzagged up the front of the building like the teeth of her mother's pinking shears or a child's drawing of lightning.

She climbed the four flights up to the flat in which she would be staying, carrying her suitcase in one hand and holding on to the railing with the other. Reaching the top, she wiped the sweat from her face with the palm of her hand and smelt the tang of iron on her skin. She knocked on the door and waited. She thought she could hear the baby squealing or screaming.

The door was opened by a woman wearing black, with her head shaved and her hairline low on her narrow forehead. Offering the woman a damp hand, Tina attempted one of the phrases she had practised in the back of the taxi during the long drive from the airport, even though the family's online advertisement had said, 'Can speak English.'

'I'm Tina,' she said, 'your au pair.'

The woman stabbed at herself with her thumb and said, in her own language, 'Grandmother.'

The shrill noise came again from inside the flat. 'The baby?' asked Tina.

'No,' said Grandmother, and beckoned her inside.

The narrow hallway into which she stepped was packed with sunshine – the wallpaper and the carpet were luridly colourful – but when the door closed, it was dark. She walked down the hallway with the violent patterns unseen beneath her feet, her hand

sliding blindly down the wall, the wallpaper rough to the touch, and the screaming filled the hallway.

Climbing the two stone steps up to the kitchen behind Grandmother, she first saw the broad back of a tall man standing beneath a bare lightbulb, and then she saw the pig clamped, shrieking, between his knees. She imagined him leading the pig up the iron staircase, her trotters skidding on the metal steps, and heaving her if she would not climb. She pictured the pig stepping through the front door, on to the brightly patterned carpet, being guided down the dark hallway and up the steps into the kitchen.

Another man was silhouetted against the window. He was sitting on a chest freezer, smoking a cigarette and laughing. Grandmother pointed at him and said, 'Father.' A baby sat beside him in a highchair, watching the man with the pig. Tina could tell they were all family – the men and even the baby had the same narrow forehead and the same broad jaw as the woman. They too had black clothes and shaved heads.

Grandmother turned to the man with the pig and said, 'Uncle.' He looked at Tina, looked her in the eye, but did not smile. He returned his attention to the pig squirming between his legs, picked up a large knife, and then he smiled. He wrestled the pig out of the kitchen and across the unlit hallway into a bathroom,

and closed the door. The squealing got louder, and then stopped.

All summer, every evening, she has eaten pork.

On the first night, they had chops. They ate together in the kitchen, and Father fed scraps of meat alternately to the baby and to the dog. The family talked quickly, interrupting and raising their voices over one another. The pace and the dialect and the heavy accent made it impossible for Tina to follow the conversation, and her formal phrases were like wallflowers at a wild party.

She must have been staring at Grandmother when Uncle turned to Tina and said in English, 'There was death in the family,' and he touched his shaved scalp to indicate that this was the custom.

'I'm sorry,' she said, and then, 'So you speak English.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I have a girlfriend in England. She lives in London. Where do you live?'

'I'm from Leicester.'

Uncle pushed away his empty plate and said, 'Tigers.'

'Yes,' said Tina, 'Leicester Tigers,' and she smiled, but he did not. Father lit a cigarette.

She was not due to start work for the family until

the morning. Tired from her journey, Tina excused herself and went to bed early. In the bathroom, the shower curtain was pulled across; she did not pull it back. She washed her face and brushed her teeth quickly, went to her room and shut the door. There was a lock – a keyhole – but no key. Despite the heat, she only half-undressed, and got into bed.

She lay awake for a while, hearing the family talking loudly elsewhere in the house. When she fell asleep, they crept into her dreams – she dreamt that there was someone in her room, standing at the foot of her bed, casting a large shadow on the wall, and the pig was there. It jumped up on to the mattress and lay down, heavy and warm against her body, snorting and snuffling in the dark.

When she woke in the morning, opening her eyes to the strange ceiling, she found that she could not move her legs. She lifted her head and looked down the bed. The dog lay across her shins, nosing noisily at something between its paws. It stayed there watching her with its sad, black eyes, its sopping tongue hanging down, while she dressed, and then it followed her to the kitchen, carrying something in its wet mouth.

In the hallway, she met Uncle and he said, 'Tigers.' She smiled, but he did not.

Grandmother and Father were already in the

kitchen when she and Uncle arrived. Tina said, 'Good morning,' sat in the place which had been set for her and looked at the breakfast already on her plate.

'Pig fat,' said Uncle, sitting down to his. 'Eat it.' The dog was chasing a half-eaten snout around the kitchen floor with its nose.

Father lit a cigarette, and Uncle said to Tina, 'You have to clean the bath.' The men left, and Grandmother cleared the table around her, and eventually Tina was alone with the baby. She leaned towards him and said, 'Hello,' first in English and then in his own language. She pulled faces and made animal noises and laughed awkwardly, while the unsmiling baby regarded her.

When the baby was napping in his cot in Grandmother's room, Tina went to the bathroom with Uncle. 'I will show you,' he said, pulling aside the shower curtain and bending his big body down to make a white patch on the side of the cast-iron tub.

Tina, scrubbing at the pig blood and rinsing away the pink foam, with the taste of lard on her tongue and the sting of the cleaning fluid at the back of her throat, felt queasy and light-headed. She sensed Uncle standing behind her in the doorway, watching her. When she finished and straightened up, she turned around to look at him, but nobody was there.

On the third day, she unpacked. She placed her valuables – her money and her passport – in the drawer of her bedside table. She put her clean clothes in the chest of drawers and her laundry in the wicker basket.

Grandmother did the family's washing in a big, metal tub with a corrugated board and a bar of soap, and then she threw the dirty water out of the front door. It dashed on the steps and hit the slabs four floors below, and dried in the sun. The sometimes damp pram was kept at the bottom of the staircase. Every trip out was four flights down and four flights back up carrying the baby. Tina seemed to be forever on those slick steps with the baby in her arms.

Grandmother showed her how to scrub the men's shirts against the washboard, how to hang them out to dry on the lines strung from window to window, and how to cook pulled pork. At suppertime, Father sat down quickly and ate hungrily.

'You made his favourite,' said Uncle.

Grandmother touched her on the arm and said something which Uncle translated. 'She says you can be his girlfriend,' he said, indicating Father, who did not look up from his meal. Tina laughed before she realised that Grandmother was making a genuine

proposition. Grandmother spoke again, and Uncle said, 'She says if you do not like him, you can be my girlfriend.' He did not smile.

'But you have a girlfriend,' she said.

'She lives in London,' he said. 'You can live here.'

After supper, after the pork scraps had been scraped into the dog's bowl and the greasy plates had been washed and dried and put away, Tina went outside to watch the day ending. The bone-dry washing hung in the sultry air, the dusk beginning to settle in its folds. Uncle was sitting on the top step of the staircase, eating a bag of aniseed balls. She sat down beside him and asked, 'Where is the baby's mother?'

For a long minute, he did not answer or look at her. He moved an aniseed ball around in his mouth; she heard it clattering against his teeth. He rubbed at the dark circles under his eyes. And then he said, 'She left.'

'She left her baby?'

'She tried to take the baby.'

'Where is she?'

He worked the aniseed ball until it was nothing, and then he looked at her and said, 'She's gone.' He smiled; she saw his teeth, his saliva stained red, and the flash of a flat-cut diamond on his incisor.

'But without the baby?'

'A man must have an heir,' he said. He put another aniseed ball in his mouth and did not look at her again.

She wondered about the diamond; she wondered whether it rubbed against the inside of his lip, and whether it hurt. She could almost taste the blood.

Every other evening, when the baby was asleep, Tina had a bath. She took very little hot water, not wanting an incomprehensible scolding from Grandmother, nor a comprehensible one from Uncle. She sat in the deep tub with lukewarm water lapping at her bare knees, bathing warily. There was no lock on the bathroom door. At first she pulled the shower curtain across, in case anybody should come in by mistake, but she found that she preferred to leave the curtain drawn back, so that she could see there was nobody there.

Halfway up the iron staircase, she pauses. She stands still, her arms aching, her legs shaking, nausea swelling in her stomach. She listens to the distant buzz of life, the sounds coming from the market and the factory – a noisy, windowless box of a building in which Uncle works on the production line. She has often wondered what it would be like to spend so much of your life like that, without daylight, without sunshine, without

fresh air. The night shift has ended and the day shift has started, and Uncle will be home soon. A mile away, the road is choked with cars and buses, and the streets are full of people coming and going. But here, now, it is dreadfully quiet.

They watched her as she went about the house. They were watching when she went out and they were watching when she returned.

She went to the kitchen to make Father a cup of tea and found Grandmother and Uncle in there. While she filled and boiled the kettle, and fetched a cup and saucer from the cupboard, and made the sweet, black tea, she felt their eyes on her back, felt their gaze following her as she carried the full, hot cup slowly across the kitchen and down the steps. She recalled reading somewhere that if a woman is carrying a cup of tea down the stairs and falls, she won't drop the cup because she will think it's a baby. As Tina stepped carefully from the bottom stair into the hallway, Uncle, close behind her, said, 'She wants to know if you have children.' Tina turned, and the cup rattled on its saucer.

Tina looked at Grandmother, who was standing behind Uncle in the kitchen doorway looking at her, at her figure, at her hips.

'No,' said Tina. 'No children.'

Grandmother spoke, and then Uncle said, 'But you can have children, yes?'

Tina hesitated, thrown, but she said, 'Yes,' although she wondered how she would know – she didn't know that she *couldn't* have children.

In the living room, she gave the cup of tea to Father and he watched her pick up the baby, who smelt of cigarettes.

She gave the baby a bath in the big tub, crouching on the concrete floor, while Grandmother sat on the toilet seat lid with a towel, looking at her. It made Tina nervous, being stared at like that. Grandmother's gaze made her clumsy, made the baby feel particularly slippery and squirmy. He tipped out of the cradle of her arm and headbutted the surface of the water before she righted him. Grandmother stood quickly and, scolding her, intervened, taking the baby out of the bath, out of Tina's hands. She wrapped him in the towel and jiggled him up and down, and he began to cry. Tina drained the shallow bath, and the baby's jagged crying became screaming, scratching at her raw nerves.

One evening, carrying a full glass of water down the kitchen steps, Tina stumbled. The heavy, cut-glass tumbler fell out of her hand, clipped the stone step and

whumped down on the carpet, where it lay in the dark puddle of its own spillage. She inspected the glass, and found a crack. There was nobody around – nobody in the hallway, nobody in the kitchen. Tina dried the wet patch on the carpet as best she could and put the glass at the back of the cupboard, behind the rest of the tumblers.

Later, walking through the market, stopping to look at a stall full of glassware, she saw some tumblers very similar to Grandmother's, though not quite the same. She decided she would buy one and secretly replace the one she had dropped, but when she looked in her purse she found she had only small change. She went back to the flat to fetch more of her money, but when she opened the drawer of her bedside table it was empty, her valuables gone.

She went to confront Grandmother, who pretended not to understand her, dismissing her with a flicking, shooing hand. Tina turned to Uncle, who said, 'We will keep safe your money and your passport.' Tina tried to argue, to insist that they return her possessions, but Uncle calmly repeated, 'We will keep safe the valuable things.'

She sat quietly through supper, her stomach knotted, unable to eat. She did not know what she could do, apart from going into their bedrooms

to look for her belongings, but there was always someone in the house.

When everyone had finished, Tina cleared away the dirty dishes, scraping the uneaten pork from her plate. Grandmother and the men remained at the table, talking and watching her. Tina washed up. She did not care now about the glass she had broken and hidden in the cupboard. She handled the cut-glass tumblers roughly – they clinked in the water and squeaked in her wet hands in mid-air. Grandmother spoke sharply to Uncle, who said to Tina, 'They are heirlooms. They are valuable.' He thumped his fist twice against his big chest, against his heart, to suggest their sentimental value.

Tina dried the glasses and opened the cupboard to put them away, and immediately she could see that the one she had pushed to the back was gone.

'We must say, Tina,' said Uncle, 'when we make a mistake.'

She put the baby to bed, lingering long after he fell asleep. She couldn't bear to go back to the smoky, suffocating kitchen. Her top was wet under the armpits. Her back and her scalp were sweating. She went to the bathroom, ran the cold tap, and splashed lukewarm water on her face. She opened the tiny window wide, hoping for a little air, but

instead she felt the day's warmth slumping through like dead weight.

She nears the top of the iron staircase, and now she is climbing so slowly but still she is almost there.

She went from the bathroom to her bedroom and stopped outside the door. She looked back towards the kitchen, where they were all busy talking, and then stepped across the hallway and slowly opened Grandmother's bedroom door. The baby was asleep in his cot, with his night-light on. She crossed the quiet room, hearing the noise of the carpet beneath her feet. She went first to Grandmother's bedside table and opened the drawer, but inside there was just a Bible. She slid her hand under the mattress and ran it all the way down to the foot of the bed, feeling the bare slats. Under the bed, there were only slippers; in the chest of drawers there were only clothes.

Tina went to the cot. She slipped her fingers down between the bars and the baby's mattress. The baby sighed and Tina froze, willing him not to wake, not to cry – she did not want Grandmother coming down the hallway. She wondered whether she dared to look in the room the men shared. She could still hear the debate going on in the kitchen.

Suddenly, she looked up. A figure stood in the

doorway, looking at her with her hands in the baby's cot. Her heart bucked inside her chest like a wild horse roped.

'I was just checking on the baby,' said Tina, and her voice sounded strange to her, disembodied in the dim room.

'My mother does not like you,' said Uncle, the diamond glinting on his tooth as he spoke. 'She does not trust you.'

Tina wondered how long he had been standing there.

'I want my things back,' she said.

'You do not need your passport now,' he said. 'But I will bring you money.'

Tina went to her room and sat on the edge of her bed. When there was a knock at her door, she went and opened it. Uncle held out a couple of notes in the local currency, just pocket money. She looked at him, and he said, 'It is enough now. Why do you want more?'

She took the notes, and closed her door again.

It was so hot. It was unbearable. The window in her room did not open; the frame appeared to have been painted shut. But it seemed that there was no cool air anyway, anywhere. Her heart was beating fast and she felt nauseous. Her mouth was dry; she wanted a glass of water but she did not want to leave her room.

She got into bed and lay awake, sweating into these strangers' sheets, loathing the dragging summer, just wanting it to end.

In the morning, she took the baby out early, and quietly, leaving Grandmother sleeping. She walked him slowly through the market while it was setting up, and through the still-calm streets, delaying her return. He fell asleep, and she thought that she would have liked to just keep walking, walking with the dozing baby, never to go back.

She stopped at a payphone and thought of calling her parents. She had coins, or she could reverse the charges. She put the brake on the pram, lifted the receiver, and dialled the international number. It rang – she saw the phone at home ringing in the empty kitchen, ringing through the dark house, because, she realised, if it was early morning here then it was very early at home, still nighttime. She pictured her parents asleep in their bed, or half-woken, frowning into their pillows and turning over. She stood with the receiver pressed to her ear long after she knew that nobody was going to answer.

She heard the factory whistle blow, signalling the end of the night shift. Now Uncle would go drinking, and then he would return home for breakfast.

She replaced the receiver and collected her returned coins. She walked back through the market, and saw the glassware stall again. She had her pocket money from Uncle in her purse. She stopped and looked at the cut-glass tumblers which were not too different from the one she had damaged. She bought one, as a peace offering, and then she walked slowly back to the flats.

She parked the pram on the wet slabs underneath the iron staircase. Grandmother was up – she had done a wash already. Damp laundry hung in the morning sunshine. Tina lifted the sleepy baby out of the pram and began the climb up to the top. She felt queasy at the thought of sitting down to breakfast. She had no appetite. She had a twitch under her eye.

She was more than halfway up when she realised she had left the glass from the market in the bottom of the pram. Wanting to give it to Grandmother before breakfast, she started back down, down the slick steps with the baby in her arms, and perhaps it was because she had not slept or eaten; perhaps it was because she felt sick and was too hot; perhaps it was because she was hurrying, not wanting to meet Uncle on the stairs, smelling of alcohol and aniseed; but in any case, she tripped.

At the top of the staircase, she takes the weight in the crook of one arm and, with a deep breath, opens the door with her free hand. She steps into the bright hallway and pulls the door to behind her, and when the door closes, it is dark.