
Opening Extract from...

You

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For Clemmie
with love always

One
February

It's HAUNTED, she thought.

They emerged from the lanes on to the upper reaches of the moor, and Cecilia understood that the baby girl was still there: there in the sodden cloud shadows, there in the bracken.

Once she had thought that her baby lived in her own mind only, projected on to passing buggies and strangers, the back of a dress glimpsed and lost. Yet the child had stayed here all along, here where the wind blew and the ponies' manes made limp flags. She had never gone away.

They drove across several miles of countryside – mother, father, three daughters – to a hamlet in a river valley near the centre of the moor. The children pushed out of the car to approach their new home on foot, the older girls languidly disgruntled as they lifted their mobiles skyward in search of reception, the youngest impatient in her desire to capture a Dartmoor pony. A noise more raw and round than anything they'd heard in London filled their ears, roadside streams racing, lone birds fat and savage with sound.

Cecilia followed them towards the house of her childhood, now her own new home. It was the same, joltingly the same as it had always been, changed only by distortions of memory that receded as the stone reality confronted her, but she walked up the path through the garden as hesitantly as an intruder.

'Is it strange to be back?' her middle daughter asked, the river torrent behind them loud in the air.

'No,' said Cecilia untruthfully, stroking her daughter's hair, and she had an instinct to run back down the path.

They reached the porch and she pushed open the door, the knocker slamming against it with disquieting familiarity. She felt seventeen again in a moment: slender and omnipotent and powerless. The old log smoke against granite, a scent forgotten even during two decades of rumination, shot back into her bloodstream as she stepped inside, and she knew with all certainty that if she had returned to her old house in order to lay a ghost, it would turn and find her first. The hall seemed stained with it, with what she had done.

Two

The House

Her childhood was supposed to be about innocence. When Cecilia Bannan was a girl, she considered herself happy. It was only later that she wondered whether her upbringing with its extreme isolation, its perceptions almost entirely informed by books, had left her dangerously naïve. In that place and time, anything could happen. The great liberal experiment of the Sixties and Seventies, so well meant, had its consequences. Children were layered into old cars like animals, allowed to roam the moors, raised on spring water and brown rice in the company of goats and peripatetic idealists, and sporadically killed by bogs or farm machinery. In that unkempt Eden in which romantic impulses could bloom, Cecilia didn't guess the intensity of her own desires.

It was the beginning of the 1970s when her parents, Patrick and Dora Bannan, bought their dilapidated Dartmoor longhouse with its spread of barns and outhouses at the end of a steep-banked lane. The low-slung building with its thatch and glow of stone, its wind-beaten curves and rounded porch, seemed to idle and doze, as though still settling into 800-year-old foundations. Patrick, the second-youngest son of a prosperous Dublin textiles family, and Dora, née Dorothy, a Kentish deputy headmaster's daughter, had decided to move their growing family to the middle of Devon where artistic communities flourished and children could exist unfettered by convention.

Dora, unpacking, her hand-turned bowls already retrieved from crates to hold grapes; paintbrushes and recorders instantly as accessible as toothbrushes; the tabby with its buttered paws obediently resident on a rocking chair, sighed at dust and planted kisses as she discussed her children's countryside future with them. 'This means, you see my darlings, that you can swim every single day; in winter if you choose. You can paint on the old walls, ride ponies . . .'

She wore a thick cord button-through skirt, her hair lying in a pale plait down the back of her Guernsey, and cooked while transporting a baby. Candlelight amplified mug shadows through that flagged cavern of a kitchen, gradually warming as the Aga belched its first ashes of the season, meat hooks curving from the ceiling and the dresser looming like an oak beneath which the children scribbled with felt tips at the corner of a table so large it had been constructed there at the beginning of the century and couldn't be moved. Cecilia, aged three, plump in a brushed-cotton dress and stout boots, barely dared to walk beyond the kitchen into the darkness of rooms where she could be lost and soaked by the ghosts that surely crowded the shadows.

She and her elder brother opened the window in the early hours of the morning to the rush of the water, distant owls, bats, moths: a kind of three-dimensional darkness of living things and papery collisions. She felt that she could run for ever across screaming floorboards, mud, grass, slate, into wardrobes, along passages, and it would never end, she would never find every cranny, every secret of that place.

Later she looked back and wondered: where were they at that time, the people she would love and long for in her life? One a man who was twenty-two to her three. The other not yet born.

Within days of moving in, Dora and Patrick realised that the simple upkeep of the house, precariously mortgaged and acquired as precipitously as they had found each other, would drain their resources. And so in those first weeks, they hastily filled spare rooms and outbuildings with the strangers who bobbed around the moor

in search of cheap accommodation and surfaced at a rumour of a barn or studio, a little employment, a beautiful view.

'Who are all these people?' Cecilia asked.

'Neighbours,' said her mother tentatively.

'Why do they live in our house?'

'Only a couple of them do.'

'But why? Do they live with us?'

'I suppose they do. Just for a little while.'

But the men with foxy beards and fluty women in dresses resembling aprons, the hippies and mud-caked artisans who fetched up at Wind Tor House stayed on, their tobacco, gouache and miso thickening the air, their irregular rent paid in inexpert dry-stone walling or an afternoon's digging or a casserole dish of mulled wine at one of the many parties that spontaneously occurred. To the Bannan children, they and the farmers' families scattered over the hills were civilisation.

Cecilia, the second child, was a red-haired stubby girl with a rosebud mouth, an indistinct nose and a sweetness of nature that endeared her to her parents and their friends. At four, she was sent on a bus along three miles of lane to the local primary school, where her older brother Benedict was already happily failing to learn to read among illiterate ten year olds. Bored by tales of Pat the dog, Cecilia wrote orphan stories while her contemporaries doodled in a babble of neglect and left early for harvest. At home in the afternoons, Benedict, Cecilia and Tom the toddler fought, drew, piped, quilted, wove and fashioned wooden objects, smilingly encouraged by Dora, who offered them no choice but to converge in artistic endeavour. At that time – before the great mistake – Cecilia adored her mother and father equally.

'You are my little peg creature,' her father Patrick told Cecilia.

'What do you mean?'

'You're a peg doll. Look at your big eyes, your round little head.'

He called her Arrietty and Darrell Rivers after the books she read. He cherished her for her affectionate ways and misguided fantasies:

skewed ideas of the world that made him laugh, but which caused mild concern in Dora. He kept an old-fashioned pinball machine requiring thumping and rocking in one of the bedrooms, an unreliable jukebox in the hall, a 1930s racing car decaying in a barn. He made his pottery, sold to friends and visitors, and patched up the lodgers' accommodation; he turned conversation into lyric, entrancing and infuriating Dora, who was just beginning to fend off the knowledge that this almost excessively captivating member of a successful Irish dynasty was in fact a drifter. In a flurry of activity, she had the largest barn converted into an artists' retreat on borrowed labour and charged London-based writers and sculptors higher rent, employing girls from the village to change the dark-brown bed linen. Patrick made speculative plans for a summer pottery school.

Aged eight, Cecilia sat in her monkish room over the front garden of Wind Tor House awash with hay fever as she immersed herself in the Borrowers and the Bastables and Miss Minchin. She still had the freckles-and-milk faintly sinusy look of a redhead. She was ferociously determined to excel: to discover treasure; to become a species of child genius; to find her own Heathcliff upon the brooding moors.

'I must find work,' she said to herself, filled with anxiety over family fortunes. She made a pledge out of the window and watched it land at the top of Corndon Tor. She wondered whether she could earn a decent wage during the summer pantomime season like Posy, Petrova and Pauline, the Fossil girls; but a professional engagement would require an education at an academy or seminary of some sort, preferably run by a Russian, and she didn't know how to find one. Were there ballet classes in Widecombe? She would have to apply post-haste to the Wells.

Ballet practice – 1 hour night. 3 hours Sat and Sun, she wrote on the timetable above her bed.

Her father did not seem to have a regular job, like other people's fathers.

Be good, she wrote in secret mouse writing on a corner of her timetable, because if Beth March could be so good, so very, very

good, she could attempt to rein in her flawed nature. *'Do better and be better' – Emily Brontë*, she wrote on the other corner.

Help mother, she added. Sara Crewe had slaved among coal scuttles for Miss Minchin and held her head like a princess all the while, so she herself could help sweep the Aga ashes for her poor overworked mother and devote an hour a day after her homework and ballet to scrubbing, brother care and log carrying.

Circus studies, she wrote tentatively, for perhaps she could make a bob or two as a circus girl. She had no idea where one learnt the skills or found a circus with which to run away, but the majority of the lodgers could teach her juggling and she would practise her somersaults.

Ice skating, she wrote. A white-muffed girl from *Bunty*, her elongated sketch of a leg raised in star-spangled air, sailed past her. If she studied hard and showed aptitude, like Harriet of *White Boots*, she should be able to take her inter-silver before the year was out. 'No carpet knight,' she murmured, but what was a carpet knight?

Piano practice – 1hour; 4 hours weekends, she wrote, and this she could do, for an old woman thumped out scales in Widecombe church hall for those who cared to learn, and care to learn Cecilia did. Her own mother supplemented her lessons, and had begun to teach her the cello.

Her father seemed to knead and fire in his pottery barn, but where did he sell the pots?

Wares, she wrote, uncertain of how to express her commercial imperative. She could produce her own bowls, make taffy, tap maple syrup or sell lemonade from her window to passing cyclists.

Wolves howled outside, savage and yellow-eyed on the wolds. Water poured off the fields, bubbled beneath the lane and rushed along the gully in front of the garden. The fogs rolling down from the moors could smother lambs and young children. Spirits and demons followed the Dart and smugglers signalled from among the gorse at night. It would be best if she could unearth some ingots. How else would they fend off penury? What if they had to make shoe polish with soot and dresses from curtains? She shivered in

delighted martyrdom. She saw herself standing stiff in the classroom, unable to sit in her cone of brocade as children laughed, poked and pulled her hair, while shortly thereafter the headmistress summoned her to her study to inform her that her parents were dead.

At Wind Tor House, chaos reigned: spare rooms, utility rooms, potting sheds, cottage and barns were filled to capacity with tenants renting, scrounging, bartering. Nine neighbouring children would appear for tea, parents uncertain of their whereabouts; in the summer, caravans sloped in the mud, packed with students seeking work in the artists' barn, trailing patchouli and damp clothes. Patrick's stereo system thumped across the valley with no one to complain, cottages dozing by the river; birds crying; the Beatles booming. There were parties: a Christmas celebration, guests arriving on horses, skidding in old Land Rovers; a summer gathering that spilled to the river, adults naked in the water, draped over fields; Patrick picking up his guitar, drunk children catching the ponies at night. It was, Cecilia feared sometimes, too rich, too wild, too free.

'I've got news,' said Dora one summer evening, brightness disguising weariness.

'Oh yes?' said Patrick, looking up, his mouth twitching in apprehension, then straightening with tangible effort.

'I've got a job. Music teacher. Haye House.'

'A regular income,' said Dora when he failed to respond.

He was silent. He exhaled. 'That's great,' he said.

Patrick, now in his mid-thirties and already emanating strands of disappointment, was almost openly reduced. The confidence that was rooted in his birth family's prosperity and his own charm butted daily against reality, resurrected only at night with music, with company, or among the children who were his loyal companions. In an attempt to escape the industry that supported three generations of his family, he had incongruously trained as an accountant in Dublin, but had never practised. Unlike his taller red-headed brothers with their unquestioning participation in the family business, he,

the physically slighter but mentally faster rebel, was now beginning to flounder, a sense of embarrassment as perceptible as nervous sweat beneath his old boyishness, his essential philanthropy. His brown hair was patched with grey. He knew that he lacked purpose and that he should have persisted with his earlier career, but it felt too late already. His wife was by this stage infinitely more practical.

'Subsidised fees for teaching staff's children,' said Dora in a controlled manner, glancing at the three alert faces at the table. 'Considerably subsidised.'

'Haye House?' said Cecilia suspiciously.

'Haye House,' said Dora, unable to contain her satisfaction.

Haye House, the progressive school some eleven miles to the south, where the Dart spread and gave rise to water meadow and sheltered garden, was the institution almost uniformly aspired to by the Bannans and their more bohemian acquaintances scattered across the moor. Haye House was the social and scholastic ideal. Patrick's parents, embracing an expedient solution to a private education, had already offered to pay the reduced fees.

The school was famous, or infamous: fading rock stars' love-children mingled happily with their extravagantly monikered legitimate half-siblings; scions of attenuated European dynasties and colonial offspring mixed and mated with the children of more local wealthy families of an artistic or educationally opinionated bent, or with those simply imbued with the latitudinarian values of the time. Cash-strapped hippies with the right connections and subtly defined credentials – a tone of voice, a way with a plectrum, an invisible but dogged instinct for nepotism – managed to secure themselves healthy subsidies for their dirty-haired broods, to the puzzled irritation of their more industrious contemporaries. Over the years, accidents, precocious record deals, drug addictions and frequent recourse to child psychologists had further ruffled the turbulence of academic life.

Cecilia caught sight of the circles under her mother's eyes as she talked to her family. 'You're tired,' she said, and Dora slumped a little before she gathered herself and kissed the head of the daughter

who had always assumed responsibility for fragile family harmony as though she were the oldest child while the real firstborn happily shirked it.

'You're a lovely girl,' said Dora quickly. 'What do you think? I think you'll love it.'

Cecilia dropped her gaze. She spent her evenings plotting to apply for a scholarship to a school such as Malory Towers: a school with a uniform, prefects, medals and flying colours. She hadn't so far dared to tell her parents of her wishes.

'Do I have to go to Haye House?' she asked so quietly that no one heard.

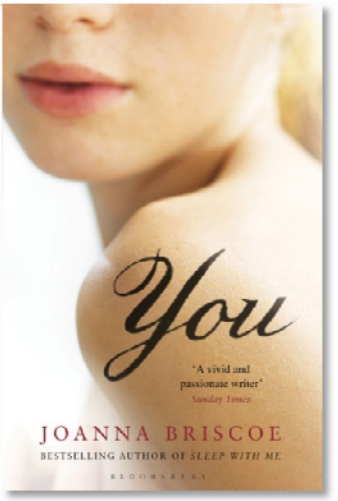
'I – I –' said Cecilia on their first journey to Haye House, still wishing to explain that she treasured other, more navy-blue desires. But she could barely form the words. It would be akin to expressing a preference for Sunday School over Drama Saturday or Battenberg cake instead of flapjack. Because Haye House was what she wanted, of course. It was what all children wanted: smoke and jam smears, kayaks and wall hangings. Down they plunged, gripping each other in the car, along high-hedged lanes frequently blocked by snow and wild pony-jams, through tunnels of green that led to the Dart. Cecilia looked out of the window, a red-haired, clear-skinned person pressing her face to a rush of leaves with all the opportunities in the world awaiting her.

'Hey you guys, walk around, soak in the place, take your time, hang out,' a teacher called Idris, originally named Ian, said to the new pupils on arrival. 'Make merry,' he added.

James Dahl was not yet teaching at the school by then, but Cecilia wondered later whether she might, by some tiny chance, have glimpsed him that day, visiting his wife's friends in the Art Department. She often dredged her memory, searching for a flicker of him between the trees and stripey jumpers, as though running and running after a disappearing figure in a dream.

You

From the bestselling author of
Sleep With Me



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A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Joanna Briscoe is the author of *Mothers and Other Lovers*, *Skin* and the highly acclaimed *Sleep With Me*, which was published in ten countries and adapted for ITV Drama by Andrew Davies. She has been a columnist for the *Independent* and the *Guardian*; she is currently a literary critic for the *Guardian*, and has contributed to all the major newspapers and magazines. She lives in London with her family.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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