

THE WHISPERING HOUSE

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the
whispering
house

ELIZABETH BROOKS



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With love for my husband, Chris

PART ONE

FREYA

August–September 2014

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I'd never have set eyes on the place if my cousin hadn't held his wedding reception on the grounds. His fiancée had grown up locally, and once she'd discovered it was possible to hire a canopy in the gardens at Byrne Hall, nothing else would do. You can't blame her. Objectively speaking, it was an idyllic spot for a wedding reception: all those lush, towering trees, the garden in full-scented flower, and the sea spread out below the cliffs like a sheet of hammered gold. If I were the kind of woman who fantasised about getting married, I'd want a wedding like that.



"You look lovely," my father said, studying our reflections in the pond. "A real picture."

"A picture of what, though?" I was doing my best to make light of the whole thing. "A picture of misery?"

But Dad wasn't going to fall in with my tone. "You look very nice," he insisted gravely.

One of the bride's hearty uncles had told me off for having a long face—that was all. It wasn't a big deal. "Cheer up, love," he'd said,

as we were queuing for drinks. “You’re meant to be a bridesmaid, not an undertaker’s mute.”

I don’t think he was trying to be horrible. He clapped me on the shoulder as he said it, and handed me a glass of prosecco, but Dad had overheard and steered me away, and we’d ended up here, by the pond. It wasn’t the nicest part of the garden, which is probably why it was deserted. The water flickered with midges and smelled of mud, and there was a stone fountain in the middle—a fat boy blowing on a conch shell—that had gone all black and mossy, and looked as if it hadn’t functioned in years.

“Bastard,” said my father, and I laughed despite everything, because he wasn’t one for profanities, not even mild ones. He was too scholarly sounding and well-spoken to carry it off. I took his arm and gave it a squeeze, but he still wouldn’t smile, so I decided to stop trying and accept that this day was a write-off as far as we two were concerned. I watched our silhouettes waver over the water, brownish green against the glaring sky. My dress, an “A-line, scoop-neck, floor-length chiffon bridesmaid’s gown in Pale Sage,” had looked so airy in the bridal catalogue, but I wasn’t keen on the real thing. Not on me, anyway. It seemed heavier now than it had this morning, and the skirt was damp and wilting round my legs.

“This ought to be a nice day,” I said. “It’s good to be out of London for a while.”

I didn’t mean to sound irritable, but how often did Dad and I get the chance to step out of our ordinary lives? Here we were in a garden by the sea, tipsy on wine and sunshine and flowers in bloom, and all we could think about was my dead sister. It wouldn’t have been so bad if we’d been able to discuss her in a gentle way—*I miss her; she’d have loved it here; imagine if she’d been a bridesmaid too,*

wouldn't we have looked a pair?—but it wasn't possible to think, let alone talk, about my sister in that way.

I pressed Dad's arm. "Stop worrying," I said, addressing our watery shadows. "That Uncle Whatever-His-Name-Is: he probably doesn't have a clue who we are. I bet he's never even heard of Stella."

There. I'd said her name out loud. It dropped through the space between us, with a whistle and a thunk, and we both flinched. I hated how that always happened. Sometimes I'd say her name accidentally on purpose, in the middle of a conversation, just to make us both hear it. One day, I thought, we'd get used to it, and be able to talk about her in a free and easy way, and she would belong to us again. I would be able to say "Stella" and move lightly on, instead of feeling like I'd drawn a curtain across the sun.

Dad poked me with his elbow as he patted his jacket pockets in search of cigarettes and lighter. He was usually furtive about his smoking habit because he knew I'd tell him off, but he didn't even pretend today, and I didn't say a word. I wouldn't have minded one myself. I was still holding that glass of prosecco, and I took a gulp while he was lighting up.

"Byrne Hall," he said meditatively, after he'd taken his first puff.

We looked up the tiered lawns to the pale, pillared house. Wedding guests weren't allowed inside—we were under strict instructions not to stray beyond the gardens—but it made a beautiful backdrop, especially on a hot summer day like today. It was rather austere, with its three identical rows of windows and the severe symmetry of its columns and chimneys, but the framing trees and sunlight served to soften the effect. I couldn't have told you what style or era it belonged to, except that it put me in mind

of Jane Austen TV adaptations; later I discovered it was three hundred years old and built in the Queen Anne style. I thought about the person I'd be if this were my home—the expansive way in which I'd live, and move, and think; the poetry I'd write; the light and freshness that would saturate my soul.

"I remember that house," said Dad. "I remember seeing it in the distance, when they took me to the cliffs in the coastguard boat, and one of the policemen said, 'That's Byrne Hall, that is; our local stately home,' and I said, 'Oh yes? Nice place!'"

I smiled guardedly and Dad took a vigorous pull on the cigarette, as if it quenched a thirst.

"Funny, isn't it?" he went on. "Having such an ordinary conversation at a moment like that?"

I shook my head and drained the prosecco to the last drop. It wasn't my first drink of the afternoon, which was probably why the ripples of reflected light in the pond were starting to look psychedelic. I took hold of my father's arm again, as much to keep my balance as to make him stop talking.

"You'd think they would have hesitated, wouldn't you," he went on, "before they booked it as a wedding venue? You'd think they'd have had the odd scruple. Or did they just forget?" A cigarette usually mellowed him, but he sounded bitter now.

"I'm sure they didn't mean anything by it. They're only second cousins, after all; they've probably forgotten it happened here—if they even knew in the first place. Anyway, it's not the house's fault that Stella died nearby, and it's a good few miles from—where they found her."

"It's barely a mile." Dad flicked his cigarette end away. It landed on the surface of the pond with a hiss and floated motionless, like

a dead creature. I watched the last grains of smoke dissolve in the hot air and tried to concentrate on not falling over.

“Litterbug,” I said with a nudge, still trying for a lighthearted tone. He made no answer, so I turned away.

One of the guests was emerging into the garden from the cliff path, his hair plastered to his head. He must have been swimming in the sea, and the whiff of saltwater on his clothes made me sit on the low stone wall.

“The sea,” I muttered into my empty glass, feeling hot and sick. I shut my eyes and imagined ice-cold waves lapping at my stomach, darkening my vision, roaring in my ears. There’d been some talk on the coach about skinny-dipping, but I assumed they’d be doing it later, in the drunken darkness, once the formalities were over.

When I opened my eyes, the man was standing at the top of the path, looking back the way he’d come. Nobody else appeared. Perhaps he didn’t belong to the wedding party? He seemed hesitant when one of the waiters approached with a tray of prosecco, and although he took a glass, he just held on to it unhappily and didn’t drink. I wondered whether he’d lost something down on the sand. His feet were bare, so perhaps he’d mislaid his shoes.

The man turned and caught me looking, so I pretended to fiddle with the clasp on my bracelet. He stared at me for a long time before draining his glass and walking away.

“Who was that?” Dad appeared at my elbow and I shrugged. The best man came to the top of the steps and waved his arms at us: the wedding dinner was about to be served, and would we please make our way to the canopy? I waved back. Dad thrust his hands in his pockets and made a little moaning noise, like a child on the verge of tears. He began rustling through the cigarette

packet for a second cigarette. If I didn't drag him off he'd stand by the pond all evening, hollowing out his lungs and experimenting with swear words.

"Come on," I sighed. "Brave face."



We skirted the pond and joined the stream of people meandering toward the canopy. I looked up at the house. The frontage had been a creamy white when we arrived from the church around three o'clock, but it was yellow now, in the early evening sun. The blinds were lowered in all the windows and there was no sign of life, unless you counted the fact that the front door was slightly ajar. It must have been cool and quiet in those high-ceilinged rooms, with just a few slivers of light reaching in round the blinds. I wondered if Stella had gone past it too, on her way to the cliffs, and if so whether she'd had room in her head for incongruous thoughts like *nice house*. Probably not. I wondered whether her last thoughts had touched on me—but I was always wondering that.

"Hey, watch it!" The woman I'd bumped into ran a worried hand over the back of her dress.

"Sorry."

Everyone was walking slowly, lingeringly. Sometimes people stopped and took in the view.

"I wonder who owns this place?" someone said.

"A couple, I believe," another replied. "Mr. and Mrs. Byrne? Or it may even be Lord and Lady . . ."

"I'd heard it was a widow, living on her own."

"Really? Oh well, you may be right. Blue bloods, anyway."

There was a notice in front of the porch, which read STRICTLY PRIVATE. The letters were black on a white background, large and unmissable.

“Whoever they are, they obviously don’t want the riffraff in.”

Most people laughed at this remark, though some of the effortfully dressed did not.

A tray of filled flutes stood untouched on a trestle table, so I swapped one for my empty glass as we went past. The wine was flat and warm, and even before I’d lifted it to my mouth I knew I didn’t want it, but I drank it anyway.



Dad and I had already studied the seating plan, before the incident with the hearty uncle. I was with the other bridesmaids on the top table, and Dad was miles away, on table five. He didn’t exactly complain as we parted inside the canopy; he just tightened his jaw and loosened his tie, as if he were psyching himself up for a confrontation.

The heat felt much heavier under the canvas, and it seemed to absorb and intensify all the sweaty, fummy, floral scents that a wedding party gives off. People were complaining, under their breath, that the canopy was too small, the long tables packed too closely—and they had a point, though they might have kept their voices down within earshot of the bride. Once I’d managed to squeeze myself into my seat I was effectively trapped, the tabletop digging into my ribs and my elbows pinned to my sides.

The starters were already in place, but once we were seated there was no room for the caterers to move between the tables, so

everything—dirty plates and new plates, wine bottles and water jugs—had to be passed along, hand to hand. I could have done with a drink of water, but the jug disappeared to the other end of the table before I could get to it, and when it came back it was empty, except for a curl of lemon peel. A hand kept snaking round my shoulders with a bottle of red and topping up my wineglass, so I drank that instead.

I didn't know the people sitting on either side of me, because they were both from the bride's family. The one on my left remained with her back to me, busily chatting to someone else. The one on my right kept up a constant, cryptic murmuring, which may have been addressed to me, and to which I responded with the occasional "Hmm" and a few vague nods. I kept thinking I heard voices behind me—*Stella Lyell . . . suicide . . . that's her younger sister over there*—but when I glanced round, the people at the next table appeared easy and unconstrained. I couldn't see Dad at all.

Here we go again, I remember thinking. Elbows in, eyes down, do what everyone else is doing. Don't think too hard or wish too hard. Don't listen to their gossip.

"Lamb Provençal," said one of the other bridesmaids with relish, reading off the menu card, as the main courses began to arrive. A plate was set in front of me, and the heat and noise seemed to swell up inside the tent, and the stench of close-packed bodies was indistinguishable from the smell of garlicky meat. I gripped the edge of the table and felt myself sway. There was still no sign of a replenished water jug, but at least the flaps of the canopy had been tied back on one side, and I could drink the green shadows of the garden with my eyes if I leaned forward and pressed against my neighbour's arm. My gaze meandered upward, through a veil of

trees, to Byrne Hall. The front door was still open, and a cold darkness seemed to seep out of it, like water from a stone jar.

“Beans?” said my neighbour shortly, shifting her chair as best she could so that our arms were no longer touching. I helped myself to French beans, before handing the dish on and feeling for my knife and fork. The lamb cutlet was covered in gritty pepper, and when I pressed it with the flat of my knife it bled like a grazed knee. On the other side of the table the two littlest bridesmaids were getting red-faced and wriggly. One of them threw her fork on the floor and the other one started to wail, and nobody tried to stop them when they slid under the table and crawled over our feet. I turned to my plate again, and the air around me staled and thickened. Outside, a breath of wind touched the lime trees, and their leaves flashed in the sun, like tumbling emeralds.

“Could you possibly cut up my lamb for me?” asked the woman on my right, with a wave of her bandaged wrist. “I’ve only got one hand here.” From the testy way she said it, I guessed this wasn’t the first time she’d asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Sorry. Of course.”

I pulled her plate toward me and began to saw, yanking the chunk of meat from its bow-shaped bone. Blood pooled over the plate and my stomach seemed to rise and fall in time with my breathing. The woman said something, but I couldn’t hear her properly over the buzzing in my ears. I set the cutlery down carefully.

“Are you all right?” she was saying from a long way off, and someone further down the table, I think it was my cousin, the groom, said, “What’s up with Freya?”

I tried to shove my chair back, but it was wedged into place, and there was no escape to left or right. With a slippery twist and an

apology I sank under the table, into the dim forest of shins and shoes. The two little girls were crouched in conference over a hoard of crumpled napkins, their satin dresses gleaming in the half-light, but they fell silent as I pushed past. White spots were floating in front of my eyes, and the racket inside my head was getting louder and louder. I crawled the length of the table, feeling for the strip of matting where the canopy ended and the lawn began, and as soon as I had grass underneath my fingers I staggered to my feet, picked up my skirts, and ran. I made it as far as the rose garden before my insides flung me forward and doubled me up.

Once I'd finished being sick, I knelt with my head bent over the fizzing soil and hoped the other guests hadn't seen. I moaned and shut my eyes and wiped my hand across my dripping lips.



The front door was still standing open. It was the first thing I noticed, over the tousled heads of the roses, when I was well enough to look up.

I sat back on my heels and stared at it. There was something so absolute about the blackness of that interior; it made me want something I couldn't put a name to—not quite sleep, or water, or coolness, but something larger that encompassed all those things. It was like the blackness of space, without any stars. It was also, of course, off-limits to wedding guests: not only was there the sign across the porch, but there'd been a reminder in bold italics at the bottom of the wedding invitation, and the best man had reiterated the message on the coach, as we were leaving the church. “The family” was in residence at present, he'd said. We were asked to be

respectful of their magnificent gardens and to remember, if we remembered nothing else, that the house itself was out of bounds.

I kicked my shoes off and left them lying in the grass. A piece of china smashed, far away in the canopy, and there was a whooping cry, followed by a burst of group laughter. I glanced over my shoulder as I walked, in case I could spot Dad, but the sea was so painfully bright that I had to look away again.

I hoisted my skirts to my knees and scrambled up the bank that separated my tier of lawn from the sweep of gravel in front of Byrne Hall. The little stones at the top were sharp against my feet, and I picked my way slowly to the door.

It was a big, sturdy edifice—much bigger and sturdier than it had seemed from down below. The white columns of the porch had seemed spindly when I saw them from the canopy, but they'd taken on a temple-like grandeur by the time I arrived beneath them. Beyond the STRICTLY PRIVATE sign there was a rope, slung museum-style between two metal posts.

I'd never have done it if I'd been sober. Even tipsy I faltered for a moment or two, but the sun kept pushing like a hot hand against my back.



The hall was as black as I'd desired it to be. I opened the door wide and took a few cautious steps.

Shapes and tones materialised slowly: the curling hulk of a staircase; closed doors to my left and right; a tiled floor like a chessboard, alternating squares of black and white. I was glad I'd taken my shoes off because it meant I could walk across the cold floor without

making much noise. The chiffon made the merest swishing sound against my legs as I stepped from black tile to black tile, avoiding the white ones in case my feet left grubby marks. I felt like a ghost, empty and silent in my long, pale dress, at ease with the darkness.

Daylight began picking things out here and there and making them gleam: the moulded leaves and apples on a gold picture frame; the brass studs on an armchair; the ribs of a plastic water bottle. I picked up the bottle and sat down on the chair, tipsy enough to feel that I wasn't trespassing; that I was expected; that these things had been put out, ready for me. The armchair creaked as I settled, and the upholstery prickled through my dress and all along the backs of my thighs. I unscrewed the bottle, tipping my head right back and filling my mouth till the water brimmed over and trickled down my neck.

The picture with the gold frame was directly in front of me, and I leaned forward to look at it, but the light from outside was wrong—too yellow, too lush—and all I could make out was a flat surface covered by a network of shiny lines, like a tray of brittle toffee that's been tapped with a hammer. I tilted my head woozily and wondered what sort of picture it was. Not that I was vastly curious. If the chair had been comfier I might not have bothered getting up, but the backs of my legs were starting to itch.

It must, I decided, be some kind of collage, with hundreds of tiny bits of paper fitted together and stuck down on a board. When I ran my fingers over the surface I realised that the shiny lines I'd noticed from the chair were made of dried glue. Whether it was an abstract arrangement, or whether the fragments came together as a coherent image, it was too dark to tell, but there was a spotlight on the wall above the frame and I could just about reach the switch.

An electric hum, a quiver of light, then everything steadied and I found myself standing in front of a three-quarter-length portrait. I didn't gasp or cover my mouth with my hands. It wasn't like that. Recognition crept up on me doubtfully, bit by bit, and even before the bulb popped and the picture flashed back into darkness, I couldn't make up my mind whether this was a portrait of my dead sister or just a picture of a girl with red hair whom I was naturally inclined—given the circumstances, and at least four glasses of wine—to identify as her.

It wasn't a particularly good portrait, whoever the subject might be. I mean, it was *all right*. Seven out of ten, B-plus, averagely competent. In terms of symmetry and proportion it was fine, but as a whole it lacked vitality. The eyes were large, lustreless almonds, the nose minimal, the lips overripe and overpink. It was an adolescent picture. An unimaginative man's idea of what a pretty woman amounted to: no greater than the sum of her parts, and perhaps a little less. I looked for the hands—Stella used to have long, tapering fingers with blunt, square nails—but there was a gap, a glaring absence on her lap, where they ought to be.

The light went out with a waspish buzz and I was left in the dark, recollecting the picture as best I could; poring over the after-image on my retinas. There wasn't a single feature that proved it was her, yet I reached out and touched the surface, running my fingers over its uneven scraps and torn edges. I liked the ripped-up effect; I liked the way those fissures and the seeping of glue caught the light in odd ways and gave the picture a mystery it otherwise lacked. It supplied the dull-eyed girl with something like a soul; distancing her from the world, as if she were observing us all through a coarse-grained veil.

“Stella,” I said aloud, into the darkness, and the house responded to my appeal with a stir and a creak. I spun round and peered upward, in search of the sound. There was a gallery leading off from the staircase, but all I could make out were clustering shadows and a rough sketch of bannisters. I hooked a stray lock of hair over my ear and smiled faintly, although it was difficult to come across as nonchalant when you weren’t quite sure which way to face. The sensible thing would be to shout “Hello?” but that was impossible. I couldn’t bear to hear my own voice reaching out into this big, black space and echoing back again, all husky and small.

I moved out of the block of sunlight and sat down on the floor beside the staircase. This was much better. I was disembodied again—a wraith in a dress of green shadows. Nobody would notice me here. I hiccupped as I squinted toward the open door, my breath tasting of alcohol and sourness. The sun was sinking into the sea now, and the view made my head hurt; it looked less like a garden and more like a heap of gold that had been set on fire. I didn’t want to go back to the party and pretend to be amused by risqué speeches. I much preferred to lie down here, with a cold tile against my ear.



I dreamed I was a fish, gutted and laid out on ice. When I woke up, the arm I’d been lying on felt stiff and my neck hurt as I tried to raise my head. I didn’t know how long I’d been asleep, but the sun had disappeared, the sea had lost its sheen, and the garden was a gathering of lilacs and blues. Far away, at the bottom of the lawn, there were loops of fairy lights glimmering in the trees, and I could hear little whines and crackles from the loudspeakers as the jazz

band began playing “Dream a Little Dream of Me.” I noticed that the door was half-closed, although I’d left it wide open.

It was that, and the thought of Dad, that got me to my feet, despite my pins and needles. I never left him for long—not unless he knew exactly where I was and when I’d be back—and it baffled me that I’d had the heart to do so here, of all places, when he was in such a jangly mood. I recalled my four glasses of wine and closed my eyes. What an idiot. What a day. I made for the door, and with every step my brain seemed to bounce like a loose rock against the insides of my skull.

I forgot about the picture until I reached the front door and took a bleary look back, just to make sure I’d been wrong. Now that the daylight had lost its glare I’d be able to tell for certain that she wasn’t Stella; that the whole thing was a drunken illusion based on hair colour and a slight similarity in the line of the jaw.

There was no picture. I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them wide again, but there was nothing there anymore—nothing at all. All right, there was a faint rectangular patch on the wall, like the memory of something that used to be there, and a light fitting above it—but there was no gold frame and no red-headed woman. I didn’t need to go closer to make sure, but I went anyway. Perhaps she had fallen off her hook and was lying facedown in the shadows? No. The floor was bare. I went right to the back of the hall and spread my palms on the space where Stella’s look-alike had hung. The wall was cold and clammy, and there was a ropy cobweb, thick with dust, that clung to my fingers as I pulled away.



The eating and speechifying had finished by the time I got back to the party, and the band was in full swing. Everyone was standing about on the grass, talking and drinking, and I dodged from group to group in search of Dad. The chatter was more raucous than it had been at dinner, and the air felt sticky with the smell of booze. A few people grabbed my arm and asked if I was feeling better, or tried to fetch me a drink, but I thanked them and shook them off.

I checked inside the canopy—at the chaos of wine stains and moulting bouquets—but everyone had left, so I wandered back toward the rose garden, pausing at the top of the steps to look at Byrne Hall. There were no lights on in any of the front windows. The house would blend into the night soon, and we'd hardly know it was there.

“Hello stranger.” My father was sitting on a bench beside a couple of empty beer glasses and an ashtray full of stubs.

“Dad, I'm so sorry.” I moved the ashtray out of the way and dropped down beside him. “I was feeling sick, so I lay down. I didn't mean to disappear off.”

“It's fine.” He touched my hand. “Honestly. As long as you're all right.”

The last of the outdoor lights came on in the trees, yellowing the undersides of the leaves. A few people cried, “Ooh!” and someone nearby said, “How lovely.” It was funny how the noise of the crowd seemed to come and go. Occasionally a quietness fell over everyone, all at the same time, and you could hear the swash of the sea on the rocks below the garden.

The saxophonist threw out a sinuous thread of tune, and the bride and groom laughed their way through a few awkward moves

on the dance floor. After a while, the music got livelier, and others began to join them in dribs and drabs. I wondered if anyone had ventured down to the beach, and I looked round for the wet-haired man, but all I could remember was his stare and the salty smell of his clothes. I couldn't have told you what colour his hair was, or whether he was tall, or broad, or anything like that. His eyes were either grey or green—unless I was confusing them with the eyes in the painting.

“You should dance too,” said Dad, but I shook my head, and we sat side by side as the night gathered around us, the couples held each other close, and the fairy lights swayed in the breeze from the sea.

I stopped noticing the music after a while, but the following day, when the wedding was over, I could still feel the pulse of it thumping through me like a coded message without a key.