

“At turns lush and tangled, with moments of clarity that burst forth from the darkness like shafts of moonlight penetrating a forest canopy, *The House in the Orchard* represents the finest in gothic fiction. Brooks is a master, enticing the reader forward, one step at a time, but only revealing the path by the light of a candle. Bewitching.”

—ERIKA ROBUCK, bestselling author of  
*Sisters of Night and Fog*

“Elizabeth Brooks has penned an inspired take on the gothic novel that would impress Daphne du Maurier and Emily Brontë. Alluring, atmospheric, and deliciously creepy, *The House in the Orchard* is a wickedly entertaining read.”

—TASHA ALEXANDER, bestselling  
author of *Secrets of the Nile*



THE HOUSE IN THE ORCHARD

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THE  
HOUSE  
IN THE  
ORCHARD

ELIZABETH BROOKS



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon



*For Isabelle, with love from Mum*



Orchard House  
Sawyer's Fen  
Cambridgeshire  
13 May, 1941

*For much of my life I have been suspicious of formal documents. Pious declarations in the name of "I, the undersigned" make me squirm: they have a solid and trustworthy appearance, but they are not solid, and not to be trusted. How can they be?*

*Nevertheless, I need a will, so I am sitting up in bed "on this thirteenth day of May, 1941," to write one, and I have engaged the vicar and his wife to call by this afternoon and witness me sign.*

*I am not—as far as I know—mortally ill, but I am feeling old, and I care what becomes of Orchard House. I want my brother Frank's son—my nephew, Jonathan—to have it, in the event that he survives this wicked war. Yesterday, courtesy of the "announcements" column in the Times, I learned that Jonathan and his wife have a baby son, and it pleases me to picture a child, or children, growing up here.*

*It goes without saying that Frank will dislike the arrangement and suspect mischief on my part, but I will not be discouraged on his account.*

*My nephew will be surprised to learn of his inheritance, since he was four years old when we last met, and he surely remembers little, or nothing, of me. I remember him, however, and it is in memory of those weeks we spent together in the winter of 1912 that I am resolved to make him my sole heir. I wish him and his family joy of the place.*

*Signed: Maude Louise Gower  
(Maude Louise Gower)*

*In the presence of*

*S. H. Yates  
(Rev. S. H. Yates)*

*Lucille Yates  
(Mrs. L. J. Yates)*

## PEGGY

*September 1945*

“Frank, if you would only listen. I’m not saying I want to leave you and move in here. I’m not even saying I’m tempted . . .”

When there’s no reply, Peggy turns from the window, but her father-in-law is gone. She hears him descend the stairs, and the latch clicks on the front door, and when she peers down from the window he’s there, on the paved terrace, looking out across the garden.

Peggy pivots, hands on hips, taking in the overflowing bookcase, the hairy cat basket, and the four-poster bed with red curtains. Aunt Maude’s bed. The mattress is as high as a pony’s back—how ever did the old lady manage getting in and out?

Laurie would love it if they moved here. Not just the Gothic bed but everything: the wild garden, the expanse of rooms, the freedom. She tries to imagine it bare and uncluttered, her four-year-old son zooming up and down the stairs, wings outstretched and guns ablaze, laying claim to all the emptied space. He’d bring the place to life, if anyone could.

Peggy lifts the heavy sash, throwing the window open. Laurie is pottering in the garden, picking up leaves and windfall apples, chatting to himself. The evening is full of peaceful smells: rain,

cows, grass. There's not much in the way of a view, because of the mist. Across the meadow she can just make out another house, but its walls have crumbled, and the roof has fallen in.

"Frank? Are you all right down there?"

Peggy rests her folded arms on the sill and leans out. Down below, she can see the drizzle settling on her father-in-law's hat and soaking through his light coat. It's not like him to stand and suffer. She wonders what he's thinking, but there's no way of telling with Frank. Never is, never was.

There's no doubt he's heard her question—Frank is sharp at ninety-one—but he doesn't reply. She leans out even farther and tries again.

"Are you all right?"

"Not really, no."

Peggy goggles her eyes theatrically, although she wouldn't dare if he could see her. In all the years she's known him, it's the first time Frank has answered such a question with anything other than, "Perfectly." When the telegram came to say his only son had died—shot down over Le Havre in the summer of '44—he made no complaint but withdrew to the sitting room with his newspaper. When he found Peggy in the kitchen, weeping with no shame over the washing-up bowl, he'd said, "Now then, my dear, Jonathan wouldn't have wanted a fuss."

Peggy rests her chin on her arms and looks out at the flat, misty meadows, half in love with the tranquillity, half missing London. Before she can think of a suitable reply, Frank declares, "It's no place for a child, Margaret." Never Peggy, with him. Always Margaret. "It's no place for anyone. We can employ people to clear it out, and evaluate it, and so on . . . There's no need for you to be involved, at all. It was a mistake to come."

Peggy is wary of being bullied.

“But Frank, the thing is . . . your sister left Orchard House to Jonathan . . . and maybe he’d have wanted me and Laurie to keep it? You know how Jonathan hated London. Remember how he used to talk about moving away and buying a cottage with a bit of land, keeping a few chickens . . . ?”

“Not here.”

“Maybe not, but—”

“Jonathan is dead. We must think what’s best for you and Laurence.”

Does Peggy need to enumerate the ways in which this place might be preferable to a slim, terraced house in Hendon, where they live cheek by jowl with Frank’s daughter and son-in-law, not to mention a lodger and maid-of-all-work? She begins, but gives up. It’s off-putting when Frank simply stands there like a post, narrow and erect, with nothing but the crown of his hat and his rain-soaked shoulders visible.

“I’ll come down,” she calls, shutting the window.

As Peggy returns to the room, the house seems to close around her, and the outdoor smells are smothered by a strange, mingled sweetness—rotting fruits, dead flowers, and violet soap. Perhaps her father-in-law is right. There is something about this house, something off-kilter, and she’s not sure she likes it. Slowly she circles the room and stops in front of the fireplace. There’s a mirror over the mantel, and a middle-aged woman looks out: a tired face, with no flesh to spare, beneath an ugly felt hat.

“Are you afraid?” Peggy asks her reflection. “What frightens you most?”

She asked the same questions of her husband, once upon a time. Six years ago. September 1939. They were in bed, curled together, loose-limbed and drowsing, and she meant it—of course she meant it—in the context of the war that had been declared that day. She meant, *Are you more afraid of killing, or being killed?* But Jonathan was too close to sleep to understand, and he answered out of a dream of childhood, with a puff of laughter, half-ashamed, “What frightens me most? I’d have to say my father.”

Peggy and the mirror-woman glide away from one another as she inspects the objects in the room—the disordered clothes, the books and papers, the souvenirs from foreign parts. The woodworms have been busy with a portable desk, and it sheds dust as she lifts the lid with the tip of one finger. There’s a silver bracelet inside, and a leather-bound notebook with a creaky spine.

The first page in the notebook reads:

*The Private Diary of Maude Louise Gower*  
*January 1876*

Peggy takes a moment to admire the grace of the handwriting and its dizzying old age. The 1870s? She thinks vaguely of dresses with bustles, and penny-farthing bicycles, and people living innocent lives, dreaming gentle dreams. Aunt Maude would have been a child.

Softly, she replaces the book inside the desk and lowers the lid.



Trailing down the stairs at Orchard House, Peggy surprises a tortoise-shell cat in the shadowy hallway. It’s hiding between a pair of

wellington boots and a pile of wooden crates, and she feels its gaze before she sees it. The cat dashes out of hiding and bolts past her, up the stairs. She stands back to watch it go, before carrying on to the bottom.

There is a scattering of apples in one of the crates, and Peggy's mouth is dry. It's been hours since she had anything to eat or drink. She reaches for one, but her fingers close on clammy skin and the fruit caves in. On closer inspection it's obvious that every single one of the apples is rotten, whether they're brown and speckled with mould, or green-gold and riddled with holes. She roots in her pocket for a handkerchief and wipes the pulp from her hand.

There's a study, to her left, with shelves and shelves of books; practically a library. Peggy doesn't read much—not as much as Jonathan did—but she likes being surrounded by books. They are a friendly presence. Her eyes skim the shelves, and she sees Euripides, Mrs. Beeton, and John Buchan side by side on one shelf.

There's a large table in the middle of the study, and a smaller desk in the corner, with a telephone. Peggy puts the receiver to her ear and is surprised to hear a thrum; for some reason she expected it to be disconnected. She sets it down quickly, before the operator has a chance to speak.

She can't help but indulge the thought of keeping the house. It would be a sin—wouldn't it?—to turn it down and return to London, where all her life's horrors unfolded. Peggy remembers, with a shudder, the last time she saw Jonathan, at King's Cross, and the dishonest brightness she'd insisted upon, in the name of courage. ("Off you go, now! Good luck!") She remembers the cloud of dust where her mum and dad's house once stood, and the strip of floral dressing gown—mum's dressing gown—spiked on the railings. She

remembers the night her own house was hit—Laurie had been staying with Frank in Hendon, thank God—and the way her feet left the ground before she made it to the shelter at the bottom of the garden.

She will miss her fellow typists at the Ministry of Information, but it's not as if she's got a job there anymore. Most of the girls have scattered, made a fresh start for themselves. It's time she did the same.

This place, though? Orchard House?

Peggy wishes there were someone she could have sent in advance, to clear the place out and give it a thorough clean. If she'd arrived to find it empty and bare, it might not have felt so uncanny, and Frank might have been more complaisant. They could have called it a blank slate and started from scratch.

She glances over the shelves and pockets *Smallwood's Guide to the English Counties: Cambridgeshire*, for later.



Frank is standing in the same spot, swigging from his hip flask. He drinks like a fish—he even managed to drink his way through the war, when alcohol wasn't to be had for love nor money, but he never seems drunk. He's a tall, straight old man, severely handsome, long widowed. Before he retired, nearly thirty years ago, he was an obstetrician. Peggy often wonders, uncomfortably, about that; Frank has the steady nerves of a good doctor, but none of the manners. Doubtless he's saved lives in his time but even so, she would not wish to give birth under those cool grey eyes.

Frank hesitates before offering the hip flask, but she ignores his scruples and enjoys a sip. He flicks one of his looks at her: a rapid

up and down that she's not supposed to notice. She's wearing slacks today, and Frank doesn't approve of women who wear slacks, or drive cars, or drink.

Peggy pulls her cardigan tight. It's a chilly evening; feels like autumn. Cambridgeshire is said to be a bleak county, isn't it? She thinks of it as windy and exposed, with a shortage of hills and trees. She shivers and waves at her son, who is making a heap of twigs and leaves at the far end of the orchard. He seems to contemplate her for a while before waving back. Some people—that awful kindergarten teacher at the school in Hendon—think Laurie is backward, but he's not. Laurie may keep his thoughts to himself, but he has plenty of them.

Frank gestures at one of the paving slabs.

"Maude bricked it up," he says. "Blocked it off."

"What?" Peggy's thoughts are still with Laurie.

Frank takes another gulp from his flask and points again.

"There used to be a trapdoor, right there, opening onto the cellar steps."

"Oh?"

"Yes. There's a vast cellar underneath this house, with only one entrance, and the very first thing my sister did, when the house fell into her hands, was to brick it up."

"But why would she do that?"

"It's an eerie thought, isn't it?"

Sometimes Frank's aversion to direct questions seems to verge on the obsessive.

He carries on: "Don't you agree that it's an eerie thought? A whole set of dark, musty, underground rooms, which you would live above day by day, but never set foot in, or see, if you moved in.

Alternatively, you could sell the place and buy a nice new-build in Hendon.”

Peggy smiles drily, but he is far away with his own thoughts and doesn't notice. Laurie is wading through the long grass, peeling bark from a twig.

“Aunt Maude can't have been all bad if she willed her house to Jonathan,” she observes.

“Oh, she'll have had her reasons.”

“*Bad* reasons?”

Frank takes another swig, as if that will do in place of an answer.

“You know Jonathan stayed here once, as a child?” he says.

“I only know because Maude mentioned it in her will.”

Peggy presses her lips together, silently urging her father-in-law to say more. She's learned, over the years, that her best bet lies in silence. Questions and expectant glances only annoy him.

“He was very small,” Frank says. “Four or five years old. His mother and I went down with the flu, and there was nobody else to look after him. I was really very unwell—too ill to be consulted, so my wife arranged for him to stay here, at Orchard House. I would never have allowed it.”

Peggy stretches the silence for as long as she can bear, but in the end she has to ask, “Why not?”

Frank is sinking down inside himself. Peggy wills him to break the fall and lift his eyes to the world, where the sky is dove grey and the leaves are turning to gold, and she is pleading for knowledge.

“Jonathan came back in one piece, didn't he?” she suggests. “Aunt Maude looked after him all right?”

Frank is staring across the garden at Laurie, who is rattling twigs against the tree trunks, and talking urgently to himself.