

HOMECOMING, AT LAST

I sang as loudly as my dry throat and tears would allow.

More the screech of a vulture than the mellow tones of a crooner.

Singing of home, buffalo and antelope who roam, the words echoed around the cavernous hall of the old house. The place I still called home, eighty-two tough years down the line, fifty of them spent in exile.

Though we had never kept buffalo, a few resident Muntjac deer had grown into a small herd during my absence, all but decimating the primulas which had carpeted the front lawn like rainbow snow.

Walking from the station, I'd spotted that a neighbour had introduced Alpaca to the adjacent fields. They looked bemused as a strange man strolled past.

Times change; neighbours change. We all change.

Getting inside had been easy. The lock on the oak panelled door beneath the Juliet balcony was as unreliable as ever, easy to flip once you knew the trick. I recalled my teenage years, a young boy-rebel with neither cause nor clue sneaking in after curfew. A breeze. Funny no-one ever thought to repair the lock.

Oh dear, I think I may be giving the wrong impression here and that would never do. This is, *was*, my home, but it is not a stately home. Large, yes, but not in the Chatsworth league. Built of Hornton Ironstone around 1600 as a hunting lodge, twenty generations of Proctors had bled, bred, laughed, cried, rejoiced, and mourned here – successive generations building, re-building, repairing, and embellishing. Always preserving the lineage. As much responsibility as legacy or nest-egg.

Then, when I was declared to be dead the house passed to my sister and her spider-weasel of a husband who stripped the assets and allowed it to fall into the cold, dusty disrepair I now witnessed.

That they were both dead was no help to me; a shadow, a phantom, the forgotten scion, unable to be who I really am to claim the legacy. Too late my return.

Yet after all the lonely years this still felt like home; the place to which I returned no matter what befell me as I grew up. If I ever had. If it had felt good to escape the shackles of family, then it felt equally good to be back. The home of Christmas trees, mulled wine, birthday candles and the smell of fresh bread baking in the Aga. Jam and scones for tea.

With joy in my heart, I had tip-toed along the corridors, raising the dust of ages, clawing through cobwebs heavy with prey; smacking curtains and tapestries frayed with age and neglect, catching fleeting glimpses into bedrooms, the billiards room, the toy-room, the grand dining room. The arrow-slit windows of the turreted staircases still spying upon secret trysts in the formal garden. Overcome by a tsunami of memories, I was struck into silence as late afternoon winter sun beamed laser-like through the kaleidoscope of colour in the stained-glass windows.

As the song of yearning stilled on my pale, shivering, shrivelling lips I lay helpless at the foot of the grand staircase; a glittering, hazy, passage to heaven from a Pressburger movie. At the end of my tear-filled gaze the knight upon his white charger faced down a dragon in the main window. I had never noticed before how much the knight resembled great-great-great grandfather. The old rogue.

Ah, I said helpless, didn't I?

The tumble had been long and hard, down every one of the forty steps upon which I used to skip with unrestrained childhood joy. Crunching off treads, crashing against oak bannisters, landing upon the chequerboard floor with bone breaking force. I know that because I could see the bone, a white dagger poking out of my thigh like one of my little white mice peeking out of its hole in the wainscotting. Of course, there was blood, never good news for one who faints at the sight. I croaked out a low ironic chuckle. The age of technology – where was my mobile phone? It had been in my hand, capturing the dust motes in front of the window when I took one step too many backwards. It flew, but where it had gone, I knew not, and its loss sealed my ruin.

The dark varnished portraits of ancient worthies adorning the four staircases looked down disapprovingly. All male, all mute, gloomy sentinels watching. No portraits in the servants' quarters below stairs. They needed no reminder of who their masters were. They too are gone. No servants needed in this modern age. There are portraits of the ladies of the line, but they are consigned to bedrooms. Freud would have a field day. I drifted in and out of consciousness as pain cascaded in waves over me. Pain-desperation-despair-resignation. Pungent memories of the half-forgotten mementoes which littered the house from top to bottom. For every child and adult who lived and died here my family kept something tangible. It was a rollcall of tragic length. A lock of hair; a faded dress, a discarded shoe, a broken toy. Teeth were a favourite for a long time. Placed under a pillow for the tooth fairy in return for a tiny silver coin. The going rate for a tooth grew exponentially in line with inflation and when I left for foreign shores a five-pound note was the least we expected of the tooth fairy.

If only the tooth fairy would find me now. No-one knows I still live, under an assumed name of course, and no-one knows I am here. My home was lost to pay due debts and as burglar I re-entered by the old way, just to see my home once more. No light, no heat as the chill of a winter's night fell over the house. When I was young, I wanted nothing more than to leave. I would be leaving no more. The light from the head of the staircase illuminated my blood seeping between bare floorboards.

Home at last.