**Weekenders**

 Mrs Williams, oh Mrs Williams, how I adore your velvet settee! How I love to lie on it all afternoon, once I’ve wiped a cloth around the taps and wheeled your bin to the front gate. And I appreciate the sweets you leave in the fridge, even the hard toffees all stuck together. If I crick my neck I can watch your TV, which is smaller than mine and stuck on a shelf, like you can’t be bothered with it.
 I doze off and wake up for the soaps, and sometimes I invite Des round for dinner and even to stay the night. It’s been a godsend for us – your big soft bed, with its rattling brass frame. And we’ve made it rattle, me and Des. ‘Hotel sex’, we call it, because it’s as good as that night we had in a Premier Inn, and just as private, even though your cottage is in the centre of the village and its bedroom lintel is so low that any passer-by could stand on tip-toe and peer in.
 I say ‘your cottage’ but of course no-one thinks of it as that. It’s Fletcher’s Cottage. That’s the name on the old sign, the name we called it through years of ruination, coal sacks up at the windows and Fletcher himself lying dead for two weeks before the district nurse broke in. Lying here, I mean. In this parlour. But I don’t bother about him, shambling brown bear in torn tweeds. I don’t believe the dead walk but even if they do, Fletcher has no argument with me.
 He might not think much of you, Mrs Williams, but then who does? Not your husband, that’s for sure. Can’t remember when he last came down here with you. It’s a cottage for one, these days, although the wine bottles you leave out for recycling suggest otherwise.
 ‘Slippery slope,’ says Melanie, eyeing them up. We sit at your round table like two lah-di-dah ladies, drinking from your grannified teacups. ‘She’s at a funny age.’ Although you’re not much older than us, Mrs Williams. Mel’s your size and she likes to go through your wardrobe and try on your clothes, pretending she’s at the opera, which is where we imagine you go in London. That green silk blouse really suits her. I’ve never seen you wear it.

\*

 Mel cleans for another family. It’s worse for her. There’s five of them, for a start, and they come down most weekends. And it’s actually Mel’s house. The one she grew up in – the one her Dad inherited from her Gran. Now they’ve stripped the sprigged wallpaper and flattened the kitchen, putting a big glass thing like a laboratory out the back. ‘My Mum used to always be at the sink,’ says Mel. ‘Although she bloody hated it, to be fair.’
 I’ve advised Mel to keep schtum about the house. If they knew they’d be all over her, winkling out her memories to put under glass, telling her they love ‘history’ and ‘vintage’ and that other thing they bang on about, ‘authenticity’, but they’d sack her just the same. Your lot, Mrs Williams, want history to be dead, and sold for a massive mark-up in an antique shop. You don’t want it cleaning your bogs.
 Mel and I go round to hers sometimes, but Fletcher’s Cottage is cosier, and of course it doesn’t have the same memories for Mel. And there isn’t the sense of being watched we sometimes get in that spot-lit kitchen extension, as though a camera’s been rigged up to spy on us. Some of the other girls say the same, when we’re doing the rounds of the weekenders’ cottages – Mel’s place is spookier than Fletcher’s Cottage, which is the wrong way round when you think of it.

\*

 There’s no work to do here. You’re clean, Mrs Williams, I’ll give you that. I think you just want someone to keep an eye on the place, and if you knew your neighbours you’d leave a key with them instead of paying me five quid an hour to keep the dust down.
 ‘Not like my lot,’ cringes Sally. ‘Animals, they are.’ She’s got Laburnums, up by the church, were the Roxburghs come for long holidays at Christmas and Easter. Three boys, who were pests as kids and are menaces now as teenagers. ‘Never picked up after themselves and don’t know how.’
 We still talk about the time Sally got the eldest’s pants thrown at her while she stood on their landing holding the laundry hamper. After that Sally’s fella sabotaged their washing machine.
 ‘Ah’m terribly sorry, Mrs Roxburgh, but there h’appears to be a flood,’ Sally simpered over the phone, while we tried not to crack up. ‘It’s pouring out from under the front door. Yes, I know you’re in London. Yes, I can let myself in. It certainly is an emergency, you’re right. Actually I do know someone who might be able to help but his call-out charges are pretty steep…’
 And so Sally’s fella, a plumber, made a packet. His mate, a plasterer, did well out of it too. Shame about the old parquet flooring though.
 ‘I’d never do that,’ said Mel. I suppose she still has a fondness for her family’s house. I’m not sentimental about Fletcher’s Cottage but I certainly wouldn’t damage it. I like things neat and ship-shape and you’ve got it looking good, Mrs Williams, although all these swags and stripes are a bit *Dynasty* for my taste. Lots of the cottages have been done out in pastels, with big white L-shaped sofas crammed in their front rooms and no space to push the Dyson around. Canvas blinds at the windows, and orchids everywhere.
 You hear them sometimes, the weekenders, chatting to one another in the streets. The wives in cotton smocks, some of them holding wicker baskets, mouthing words like ‘simplicity’ and ‘tranquillity’. I think of my Mum, stuck on the estate when the bus route changed, and how she battled to get to her outpatients’ appointments. Des would never give her a lift, because his wife works up the hospital. ‘Too risky,’ he said, like my Mum wasn’t worth the risk. So she spent her electricity money on taxis, and sat through long winter evenings in the dark.

\*

 I can’t keep away. This cottage feels like my place, and Des feels like mine too. My actual flat’s got mould in the bathroom, and the rent’s rising in January. Des lives in a chalet bungalow by the ring-road because it’s convenient for his wife’s commute – but feelings is feelings, as Mum used to say.
 It’s so relaxing to spend the night underneath your goosedown duvet, Mrs Williams. More relaxing when I’m alone, obviously. Des always teases me that he hears noises downstairs – whispering that you’ve come back, Mrs Williams; you’ve driven up from London and now you’re in the kitchen selecting a carving knife from the drawer, and what about *Withnail and I* because it’s just like that scene where – and I hiss at him to STFU because he’s always going on about scary films and he knows I can’t stand them.
 These old places are full of weird sounds, especially at night when the TV’s off. They’re basically fields squashed together and stood upright – trees, stones, mud – and the wind always makes a racket in fields. Anyway, if anyone’s going to murder us in bed it’ll be Des’s wife. If you turned up, Mrs Williams, I honestly think I’d tell you to bugger off. You must realise by now that you don’t belong here.
 I hope you never come back. I’d move in 24/7 and no-one would be any the wiser.

\*

 OK, there’s a creak and I’m not afraid, I’m not, but it is keeping me awake. It comes and goes, which is the worst thing. Just when I’m nodding off I hear it again…
 Probably a window I reckon, nothing to worry about. Not one of Des’s bloody zombies and not you either Mrs W. I would have seen your headlights flare and fade, and heard your engine turning over. If I had a car, I could get a job in town. But until I get a job I can’t afford a car.
 This is no use. I’m getting up.
 One thing I’d change, if this place was mine, is the boxed-in staircase. You can’t see where you’re going until you’re at the last stair, and if there’s a ruddy great burglar standing in the kitchen then you’re done for. Although I know most of the local burglars, or at least Sally’s fella does, and they wouldn’t bother with this tarted-up dolls house when there’s farm machinery and horses to raid. I suppose I’m the burglar, robbing your air and ease, Mrs Williams. Your *tranquillity*.
 There is someone in the house, though.
 Just Melanie maybe probably I reckon. Come round to put the shits up me. Come on, come on. Breathe.
 But why would Mel do that? She’s got two kids and her factory shift starts at seven.
 Breathe.
 Tapping. Stumbling. Through there, in the parlour. Can’t look. Must look.
 Christ!
 Back, back, back up the stairs or out the kitchen door oh Christ. Where – where? She saw me.
 No zombie, no burglar, no dead old Fletcher crackling up from his foul armchair. Not you Mrs Williams although I wish it was, I wish I could clutch your warm human arm Mrs Williams. Oh forgive me Mrs Williams! I don’t belong here. I didn’t touch I didn’t break I didn’t steal anything I just slept here sometimes. I’m sorry about Des please forgive me Mrs Williams –
 Nowhere to go. She saw me. The girl in the parlour, in the cold black air. Long dress. Bending over the fireplace, stirring the coals but the fireplace is boarded over –
 Dark eyes in a white face. I can feel her standing still.

\*

 I must be in bed. Lying down.
 When I was a child I thought the world was fixed, permanent. All the old people were born old, all the young people would stay young forever. This was Fletcher’s Cottage because he was the man who lived here. Shambling old man. Smelly. But Fletcher had been a boy once, and before that a baby, and before that nothing. There are oceans of time before me and before him when this cottage stood in the middle of the village and who lived here then, eh?
 How old is this place? I don’t know the centuries. There’s Victorian times and then the two World Wars. These cottages are from way before that. Weekenders find dead cats and old shoes bricked up in the walls from witch times.
 Lying down. Scratchy cheek. Not in bed.
 Who lived here?
 Hundreds of years.
 Fletcher lived and died as quick as a wink and I’m nothing, I’m not even a snap of the fingers.
 No time at all.
 I must have fainted.
 There’s someone here, just past the banister. Still here. Always here. Someone who belongs.