

The Rain Before It Falls
by
Jonathan Coe

Copyright © Jonathan Coe, 2007

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from The Rain Before It Falls

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

When the telephone rang Gill was outside, raking the leaves into coppery piles, while her husband shovelled them on to a bonfire. It was a Sunday afternoon in late autumn. She ran into the kitchen when she heard its shrilling, and immediately felt the warmth of inside enfold her, not having realized, until then, how chilly the air had become. There would most likely be a frost that night.

Afterwards, she walked back up the path towards the little bonfire, from which blue-grey smoke was spiralling into a sky already beginning to darken.

Stephen turned as he heard her approach. He saw bad news in her eyes, and his thoughts flew, at once, to their daughters: to the imagined dangers of central London, to bombs, to once-routine tube and bus journeys suddenly turned into wagers with life and death.

‘What is it?’

And when Gill told him that Rosamond had died, finally, at the age of seventy-three, he was unable to ward off a shameful flood of relief. He took Gill in his arms, and they embraced gently, in a silence broken, for a minute or more, only by the crackle of burning leaves, the call of a wood pigeon, the murmur of distantly passing cars.

‘The doctor found her,’ Gill said, easing away. ‘She was sitting up in her armchair, stiff as a board.’ She sighed. ‘Well, I shall have to go to Shropshire tomorrow and talk to the lawyer. Start fixing up the funeral.’

‘Tomorrow? I can’t come,’ Stephen said quickly.

‘I know.’

‘It’s the trustees’ meeting. Everyone will be there. I’m supposed to be chairing.’

‘I know. Don’t worry.’

She smiled and turned, her ash-blonde hair the only distinct part of her, bobbing down the garden pathway; leaving him, as so often, with a sense of having obscurely failed her.

★

The funeral took place on Friday morning. The village, which Gill remembered from her childhood as being painted-by-numbers in vivid primary colours, was washed grey. The rich blue sky of those memories, still miraculously preserved somewhere on so many hundreds of transparencies, was reduced now to a sheet of perfect white, signifying nothing. Against this featureless backdrop, clusters of sycamore and conifer waved dark green and viridescent in the breeze, the rustle of their leaves the only sound to break in upon the imperishable noise of far-off traffic. In the churchyard itself there stretched a lawn of paler green, broken only intermittently by mossy and lichened outcrops of stone, where headstones

rose up unassumingly, or sometimes jutted at curious angles, neglected. Beyond them, in that weak autumnal light, stood the tower of the Church of All Saints: reddish-brown, squat, ageless, the incongruously bright and burnished golden hands on its clock face pointing almost to eleven o'clock. The brickwork was jumbled and irregular, like ecclesiastical crazy paving. Rooks nested on the turreted rooftop.

Gill stood beneath the little wooden porch at the entrance to the churchyard, arm-in-arm with her father, Thomas, watching a steady trickle of mourners rounding the corner past the Fox and Hounds. Her brother David stood beside them. The last time brother and sister had come to this churchyard together, more than twenty years before, it had been to tend the graves of their maternal grandparents, James and Gwendoline. That had been an unsettling visit: Gill was prone (in those days) to clairvoyant episodes, intimations of the supernatural, and afterwards she swore to David that she had seen their grandparents' ghosts: a vision, she claimed, glimpsed only briefly but with absolute clarity, of the two of them sitting on a bench, drinking tea from a Thermos flask and absorbed in sporadic but amicable conversation. David had never known whether to believe her or not, and today, somehow, it seemed tactless to mention the incident. Instead they stood in silent solidarity beside their father and nodded greetings at each new arrival, not recognizing most of them: there were elderly friends of the deceased, and distant

relatives, long since forgotten or presumed dead themselves. Few of those assembled seemed to know each other. It was a curiously unsocial gathering.

The service was taken by the Reverend Tawn, whom Gill had met for the first time only that week. During their brief conversations she had found herself liking and trusting him, and although he had not been a close friend of her aunt's, he spoke about her fondly, and well. Then, with the formalities over, a handful of mourners drifted haphazardly back towards the welcoming doors of the pub. Gill watched her father and brother walking down the lane ahead of her: she was, for some reason, inexpressibly touched by the sight of elderly father and middle-aged son walking side by side like this, the relationship between them so evident from their posture, the shapes of their bodies, their whole *way of being* in the world (she could not have put it any more precisely). Would it have been just as obvious to a stranger, she wondered, that the two slender, dark-haired young women trailing a few yards behind her were her own daughters? She turned and glanced at them. They had both inherited their father's looks; but Catharine – temperamental, inward-looking, creative – nonetheless had something of her mother's bearing, her hesitancy and shyness; whereas Elizabeth had always seemed far more grounded and confident, with a sardonic, unflappable humour that would see her through any crisis. Gill could look at them both sometimes and consider them entirely as alien beings; she would find herself baffled

to explain how they had ever contrived to pitch up on this planet, let alone in her family. These occasional moments of detachment alarmed her – they felt like panic attacks – but they were fleeting and hallucinatory: all it took for the sensation to slip away was a gesture of closeness from one of her daughters: as now, when Elizabeth suddenly quickened her pace to catch up with her mother, and seized her by the arm.

Even before they had reached the doorway of the public bar, however, Gill disentangled herself from the embrace: she had spotted someone across the car park and needed to speak to her. It was Philippa May, her late aunt's doctor, with whom Gill had been in regular telephone contact over the last few weeks. It was Dr May who had diagnosed Rosamond's heart disease; had tried to persuade her (unsuccessfully) to undergo bypass surgery; had got into the routine of visiting her at home every few days, increasingly concerned about the possibility of a sudden deterioration; and finally, last Sunday morning, had arrived at the house to find the back door unlocked, and Rosamond's body recumbent upon the armchair in which – by the looks of things – she had passed away at least twelve hours earlier.

'Philippa!' Gill called as she hurried over.

On the point of getting into her car, Dr May straightened up and turned. She was a small, efficient woman, with unruly grey hair and warm, confidence-inspiring blue eyes which glinted out from behind an old-fashioned pair of steel-rimmed spectacles.

'Oh, hello, Gill. What a wretched business this is. I'm so very sorry.'

'You can't stay for a few minutes?'

'I would have liked to, but . . .'

'Of course. Well, I just wanted to say thank you, for everything you've done. She was lucky to have you – as a friend and a doctor.'

Dr May smiled doubtfully, as if unused to receiving compliments. 'I'm afraid you've got a lot of work ahead of you,' she said. 'That house was full of clutter.'

'I can imagine,' said Gill. 'I haven't been there yet. I've been putting it off.'

'Well, I tried not to disturb anything. There were one or two adjustments I took the liberty of making. The record player needed to be turned off, for one thing.'

'Record player?'

'Yes. She seems to have been listening to music when it happened. Quite a comforting thought, in my opinion. There was a record still going round on the turntable when I got there. The needle was stuck in a groove at the end of one side.' She reflected briefly; and, although the tendency of her thoughts was clearly morbid, at that moment, she almost managed a smile. 'In fact, I wondered at first if she'd been singing along, when I saw the microphone in her hand.'

Gill stared at her. This was quite the most surprising thing she had heard all week. Images of Aunt

Rosamond brightening up her last minutes by staging an impromptu karaoke session fled through her mind.

‘It was connected to an old cassette recorder,’ Dr May explained. ‘A very old cassette recorder, I should say. 1970s vintage. The “record” button was still pressed down.’

Gill frowned. ‘What would she have been recording, I wonder?’

The doctor shook her head. ‘I don’t know: but there was a whole pile of tapes there. Photograph albums, too. Well, you’ll see it all soon enough. Everything should be just as I left it.’

★

The drive home to Oxfordshire took more than two hours. Gill had been worried that both her daughters would want to travel straight on to London; but they surprised and delighted her by asking if they could stay the whole weekend. That evening they had what was, by the household’s normal standards, a noisy family dinner together; and after that, once Thomas had gone to bed, they fell to discussing the unexpected provisions of Rosamond’s will.

Rosamond had left no children. Her longtime companion – a woman called Ruth – had died some time ago, back in the 1990s. Her sister Sylvia was also dead, and there was no bequest to her brother-in-law Thomas. (‘You’re not disappointed, are you, Grandpa?’ Catharine had asked him that night, sitting at the end of his bed in the self-contained annexe

which he had lately, and reluctantly, learned to regard as his home. Thomas shook his head, dismissing the idea. 'I asked her not to,' he said. 'What would be the point?' Catharine smiled and squeezed his hand and turned the radio on before she left. She knew that he always liked to listen to the news at eleven o'clock, checking up on the world – tucking it in – before he fell asleep.) Instead, Rosamond had divided her estate three ways: one-third each to her niece and nephew, Gill and David, and the remaining third to a stranger; a near-stranger, anyway, as far as they were concerned. Her name was Imogen, and Gill had no idea where she was to be found these days, having met her only once, more than twenty years ago.

'I suppose Imogen would be getting on for thirty now,' Gill said, as Catharine refilled her glass with a deep red Merlot, and Stephen stirred the fire back into flame. All four of them were circled around the hearth; Stephen and Gill in armchairs, their daughters sitting cross-legged between them on the floor. 'The only time I ever saw her was at Rosamond's birthday party – her fiftieth, that would have been – and then she can't have been more than seven or eight years old. She was there all by herself. I talked to her for quite a while . . .'

'She came all by herself?' Catharine prompted, but her mother didn't seem to hear. She was thinking what a strange party that had been. Not in Shropshire, this time. No, this was a few years before Rosamond

had retired, once and for all, to the beloved county of her wartime childhood. In those days, she and Ruth had been living in London, in a substantial terraced villa, somewhere like Belsize Park. It was a foreign country, to Gill and her family. For the first time in her life, she had felt acutely provincial, and saw her parents in the same light. She had watched as her mother and Rosamond exchanged awkward, halting greetings in the basement kitchen ('Fancy having a kitchen in the basement!' Sylvia had marvelled afterwards) and wondered how it was possible for two sisters to be so distant, even with almost ten years between them. And while few situations ever seemed to disconcert her father, who was, apart from anything else, the most widely travelled member of the family, even he seemed ill at ease on this occasion: still handsome, then, in his late fifties, with full silvery hair and a complexion only just beginning to verge upon the florid, he had spent most of the afternoon examining the bookshelves before settling down in an armchair with a tumbler of whisky and a recently published history of the Baltic States.

As for Gill herself, she had stood alone (why was Stephen not there?) for what seemed like hours on the steps leading down to the tiny garden ('You're so lucky,' she had heard someone say to Aunt Rosamond, 'having such a big garden in this part of town'), leaning against the wrought-iron rail and watching the ebb and flow of exotic guests as they drifted in and out of the house. (Why had so few of them come to the funeral?)

She could remember feeling angry with herself: angry at the thought that she was now in her mid-twenties, had been through university, was already married (and not only married, but three months pregnant with Catharine), and yet here she was, feeling as gauche and shy as any teenager, utterly incapable of striking up a conversation. Her wine glass was growing warm and sticky in her hands, and she was on the point of going inside to refill it when Imogen came out through the French windows behind her. She was being led by Aunt Rosamond, who was holding her gently but firmly by the upper arm.

‘This way, this way,’ Rosamond was saying. ‘There are lots of people out here for you to talk to.’

They stopped beside Gill on the top step, and Imogen reached out a tentative hand. Instinctively, without quite knowing why she was helping her in this way, Gill took hold of the hand and laid it on the railing for her. Imogen gripped the railing solidly.

‘This,’ said Rosamond to the little girl, ‘is Gill, my niece. You might not be aware of it, but Gill is also one of your relations. You are cousins. Second cousins once removed, if that means anything to you. And she has come a long way to see me today, just like you. Aren’t I lucky, to have so many people come to visit me on my birthday? Gill, are you enjoying yourself? Would you like to take Imogen down into the garden for a moment? Only she’s a little bit lost, with all these people, I think.’

Imogen was very fair, and very quiet. She had a strong, prominent jaw, three missing baby teeth with gaps where the new ones had not yet come through, and her blonde hair fell in a tangle over her eyes. Gill would not have guessed that she was blind, had Rosamond not whispered the information to her before she turned and disappeared indoors. When her aunt had gone, Gill looked down and stroked the little girl's hair.

'Come with me,' she said.

★

They had all fallen in love with Imogen that afternoon. She was almost twenty years younger than anybody else at the party, which of course already made her the focus of adoring attention; but beyond that, the very fact of her blindness seemed to draw the other guests to her. They were drawn through sympathy, at first, and then by the strange quality of stillness, of centredness, that seemed to surround the small, fair-haired child. She was very calm, and the half-smile upon her face appeared to be permanent. Her voice, on the rare occasions when she spoke, was almost inaudibly gentle.

'How funny,' Gill had said, 'to think that we're related, and we've never met before.'

'I don't live with my mother,' said Imogen. 'I have another family.'

'Didn't they come with you today?' Gill asked, looking around her.

‘We all came down to London together. But they didn’t want to come to the party.’

‘Well, don’t worry. I’ll look after you for a bit.’

Later that afternoon, Gill had taken Imogen upstairs to the toilet and then stood waiting for her on the landing near by. Soon Imogen found her again and took her hand and asked: ‘What are you looking at?’

‘Oh, I was just looking at the view. You get a good view from up here.’

‘What can you see?’

‘You can see ...’ But for a few moments Gill didn’t know where to begin. All she could see, in fact, was the formlessness of jumbled buildings, trees, skyline. It struck her that this was as much as she ever saw. But she could not describe it to Imogen in those terms. She would have to look at it in an entirely new way, piece by piece, item by item. And start ... with what? The haze which blurred the line of transition from rooftops to sky? The sky’s barely perceptible gradations of colour, from the deepest to the palest of blues? The weird collision of outlines where two tower blocks stood on either side of what she took to be St Paul’s Cathedral?

‘Well,’ she began, ‘the sky is blue and the sun is shining ...’

‘I know that, silly,’ said Imogen, and squeezed Gill’s hand.

And even now Gill could remember it, so clearly, the pressure of those tiny fingers. Her first intimation of what it would be like, to have a daughter of her

own. At that moment she had clutched to herself the knowledge that Catharine was growing inside her, and felt that she could hardly tolerate the fear and gladness.

★

Thomas, as usual, was the first to wake up next morning. Gill made him some tea, poached a couple of eggs, then left her father reading the newspaper while she fetched twenty or so boxes of Kodak slides from the lower reaches of the old mahogany bureau in the study, and took them into the dining room, where there was more sunlight. She spread them out on the table and tutted when she noticed that most of the boxes were unlabelled. The task of sifting through them more or less methodically took almost half an hour, and when Elizabeth came to join her, dressing-gowned and tousle-haired, she had only just found what she was looking for.

‘What’s up?’ her daughter asked.

‘I was trying to find a picture. Of Imogen. Here, look.’

She handed Elizabeth one of the transparencies. Elizabeth held it up to the window and squinted.

‘Oh my God,’ she said. ‘When was this taken?’

‘1983. Why?’

‘The clothes! The hairstyles! What were you thinking of?’

‘Never mind that. Your children will be saying the same thing about you in twenty years’ time. This is

the party I was telling you about. Rosamond's fiftieth. Can you see her, and Ruth, and me and Grandma?

'Yes. Where's Grandpa?'

'He must have taken the picture. We'll go and ask him in a minute, see if he remembers. Now – you see the little girl standing in front of Aunt Rosamond?'

Elizabeth held the picture up to a patch of brighter light at the top of the window. Her attention was drawn, at this moment, not to Imogen but to the infinitely strange, infinitely familiar figure standing at the far left of the grouping: this ghostly projection of her mother's younger self. It was what people might have called a 'good photograph', in the sense that it made Gill look attractive, beautiful even. (She had never thought of her mother as beautiful before.) But Elizabeth wished that it told her more than that: wished that it could tell her what her mother might have been thinking, or feeling, at this momentous family party, so soon after her marriage, so newly pregnant. Why did photographs – family photographs – make everyone appear so unreadable? What hopes, what secret anxieties lay behind that seemingly confident tilt of her mother's face, her mouth slipping into its characteristic, slightly crooked smile?

'Yes, I see her,' Elizabeth said, finally, turning her attention back to the little fair-haired girl. 'She looks pretty.'

'Well, that's Imogen. That's who we've got to find.'

'Shouldn't be difficult. You can find anybody, these days.'

To Gill this sounded over-confident; but Catharine, when she joined them at the breakfast table soon afterwards, agreed with her sister. Neither of them was much impressed with the solicitor's plan of action, which was to place an advertisement in *The Times*. Catharine thought this was ludicrous – 'We're not living in the 1950s, and besides, nobody reads *The Times* any more, do they?' ('Least of all a blind person,' Elizabeth added) – and offered to start searching on the internet at once. By ten o'clock, she had presented her mother with a list of five possible candidates.

Gill drafted a letter that afternoon, posted five copies on Monday morning, and then settled down to the uncertain wait for a reply.