

## **Hillcroft**

by Iain Macdonald

The elephant has the keenest sense of smell of all land animals. It is also said that an elephant never forgets. Aside from Archie Gemmill's sublime dribble through the Dutch defence at the World Cup, what do any of us remember of 1978, the year the circus came north to Thurso?

From under the tree canopy of nesting rooks and jackdaws, a whiff of ammonia from the dropping-splattered pavement, I crossed Princes Street, past a parked Ford Escort with Mexico trim (a young farmer in town), over to my grandparents' house. Elevated at the top of the road, aptly-named Hillcroft had no nameplate or number. Everyone that needed to know knew this was our house.

As my younger brother Alan and I pushed through the rusting iron gate, a pleasingly fragrant mix of pine, cut grass and rose blossom met us. The ornamental millstone gathering moss and the encroaching roses looked smaller than I remembered. Grandma was at the door, up a steep flight of thirty-nine Caithness slate steps, with arms outstretched to greet. I was shocked at how small she felt, but immediately pacified by her familiar signature scent. Through the living room window I looked back in time.

The smell of seashells on the porch window pane, the seasoned wood of the cloak cupboard wafted me across the threshold. The draft insulation brushed along the tiled floor as the lock of the solid front door clicked firmly closed.

Hillcroft was a family home, an architect's and artist's home, a place I

called home. Sons and grandsons inhabit it with our own memories, layering personal interpretations and affections on the tableau set out by my grandparents. When I took my sons up on holidays I wanted to not just share what it meant to me, but to instil in them the talismanic power of a secure, remote refuge from the hubbub and noise of London and the rest of the world. We were at the cliff edge of mainland Britain, at its northern extreme. The end of the line was literally across the road.

To bring a girlfriend here was a significant test – particularly when grandma was alive. She did not hold back judgement, that my dad could testify. If a girlfriend didn't 'get' Hillcroft, it was as good as over, they would never get me. If they were not interested in coming, that spoke for itself, though I didn't always listen. When I took Sinéad up, she generously accommodated the quaint quirks of a single bathroom, the old bedroom furnishings and lower ambient temperature – knowing full well that this was a short visit, and not intended as a permanent place of residence. As I took her from room to room exposing stories and memories, it was in full confidence that this would not end like Bluebeard's Castle.

The hall had a particular acoustic quality. The thin, later threadbare rug did little to dampen the reverberations off the polished wooden floor, the smell of which lagged some way behind. The Scandinavian-designed appearance of Hillcroft's interior was a living museum to the period modernity of 1937, never modified or extended, even as design and taste in home comforts progressed.

Half-way up the beige carpeted stairs was my regular vantage point. Whenever in Hillcroft I would reframe and retake that shot: eyes open, closed, committing to memory. As a teenager it would serve as

a reassurance that in 345 days or so I would be back; suspended time, an indelible, inerasable place in my mind, neurons connected within the patina of my brain tissue. Even now, in my mind's eye, following the direction of the floor planks to the round rattan chair in the far right corner, above which on each wall I can see the tempura paintings grandma painted at art college: one a street scene reminiscent of Stanley Spencer, and another more designed, decorated with panels of gold leaf and a fantasy cloven-hoofed musical trio. Under a mirror, the black hall table was often converted into a drinks table when my grandparents hosted their parties. 'Your grandfather poured a generous gin. Hugh knew how to get a party started!' an old friend once winked at me.

My brother and I, when old enough, would be co-opted to act as servers, passing nibbles on cocktail sticks, exotic pâtés on crackers, weaving between cigarettes in bejewelled manicured hands, the wives of unnaturally tall American Navy officers, rotund kilted men, some with a fruity look, as we negotiated the questions and compliments, and another esteemed regular whose bushy eyebrows and social standing I approached with deferential politeness. My grandpa's laughter, inherited by my brother, bellowed over all others. My parents seemed at their happiest at these parties, relieved of the pressure of hosting. Amongst old friends and some new American and incoming Atomics (new scientists at the Dounreay Nuclear Establishment) there was enough of a mix of familiarity and exotic novelty to radiate colour to this remotest of towns.

God forbid if my brother and I should wake up early and make a noise playing the morning after. We lost ourselves in imaginary adventures with old paint-chipped Dinky toy cars in our bedroom under the

watchful eye of Wee Willie-Winkie, such a disturbing painting of grandma's that my sons refused to sleep under it; or we'd raid the fridge for leftover puddings dripping alcohol at the lip of the plate. Around eleven o'clock, by then wrestling through boredom, hearing movement upstairs or cued by the time pips of the local BBC news on my grandpa's transistor radio, we could safely prepare tea to refresh parched mouths upstairs as thrown curtains broadcast northern summer light.

The kitchen was always the warmest room in the house, and most comforting: on a wet day lunchtime mince cooking in a pot, or at dinner fresh dabs (like lemon sole but cheaper) lightly dusted in flour, quickly browned in butter on a frying pan. When Ann the cleaner came once a week, she ate at the kitchen table while we all sat around the dining room table, a segregation that I think appalled my young aunt. Signals of such social structure were in every room. Above the kitchen door was a wooden box containing the servant's bell indicators for each room. As children we proved these still worked, but this had limited appeal for fun after a stern telling off not to play with the shiny electric buzzers.

Between the kitchen and the dining room was a serving hatch with a heavy wooden cutlery drawer that could pull out at either end. The movement on its frame had a deep bass thump, a counterpoint to the metallic chink of the ordered utensils and cutlery. The distinct aroma of tea came directly to my adult nose where above the hatch on the kitchen side was a press filled with packets and jars of dried foods. In later years exotic Moroccan delicacies might tease, depending on how recent my uncle's last visit. The lower cupboards smelt of polish, and similarly to the sink, of carbolic soap. It was in the cool, vegetable-smelling larder that the family joke of vintage jars of jam, spirited away, sat forgotten

at the back of a high shelf. Grandma, with a war ration force of habit, would laugh off any ribbing, scrape off the crystallised sugar crust and spoon out the dark, rich raspberry or gooseberry confection into an oven dish to make her special 'jam below', a delicious lunchtime sponge pudding. Other sweet smells of vanilla and caramelising sugar from the oil-fired Esse oven, heralded slabs of tablet, or shortbread, or a cauldron of boiling fruit from the garden transforming into jam.

The garden, a domain of its own, in late summer could overwhelm us with gooseberries, then waves of raspberries, and sometimes strawberries. Past dense fruit bushes hiding blackbirds and thrushes, the borders of thick beech hedges offered cover to robins and sparrows. At the top, past the dusty greenhouse, under a canopy of spruce trees, there was a steep bank where the garden grew wild. Reaching the back slate wall a young adventurer could peer over and gaze upon the girls playing in the huge garden of 'Old Arrif's' house, an imposing Victorian villa. Through mutual curiosity they would come to the boundary wall. An exchange of questions, names, a nascent conversation abruptly cut short by a call to dinner. Running back past a patch of mint, parsley and chives under the apple tree, we weaved through the clean sheets airing on the line to the French blue kitchen door. Rhubarb grew prolifically beside the garden shed, a place that fascinated me for locked-away hidden mysteries, amplified by the small peep holes in the door flaked with weathering paint emanating smells of petrol, fertilizer and dried grass cuttings.

The reek of peat or fresh coal crackling and sparking on a fire carries me back to Hillcroft's living room. All three bedrooms and the studio each had their own fireplace, decorated in green tiles and an image of

a Viking ship. But in my lifetime it was only the statuesque cream and black Art Deco marble fireplace in the living room that I ever saw in use. A little china figure of Dicken's Mr Pickwick kept a permanent place on the mantelpiece, while gilt-edged calligraphic invitation cards with royal crests appeared like perennials according to season. The white bespoke-carpentered built-in bookshelves drawing your eye to the fire held a treasure of antique books, old maps and papers: Egon Ronay Guides for places to eat, gardening calendars, war histories, artist's monographs and Reader's Digests. Should little fingers, and much older ones alike, be tempted to pull out a book, there was often the bonus of a lost postcard or forgotten notes sandwiched between the musty yellowing pages of print. My favourites were old Ordinance Survey Sheets 11 and 12, treasure maps where I could trace the sites of brochs, standing stones and burial chambers scattering the Caithness and Sutherland wilderness, the shoreline filigree, the Norse placenames: Canisbay, Orlig, Reay, Ulbster.

Perhaps it was the higher density of oxygen or the absence of pollution in the Caithness air that knocked us out. We would collapse into the big armchairs and fall deeper into an afternoon nap. They had arms of monumental scale, like the wide lapels of Fred Astaire, and just as classy. Wide enough for two boys to sit on, perches for family photos, or a cup and saucer nestled on a folded newspaper, the quick crossword incomplete. It was dreamy and safe. Only twice were the ramparts challenged: an abandoned black Norton motorbike left at the side of the garage gave me nightmares, its irregularity shocked me, and then the break-in, the forced backdoor, the loss of two Art Deco Max Le Verrier figurines holding globe lights aloft that once sat on each side of the fireplace, burgled along with some of grandma's handmade

silverware from art college. Her other artworks, hung on the walls, were left untouched. The portrait of my uncle, his youth caught forever in impressionistic oils, dominated the room. It hung in pride of place over the walnut drinks cabinet that had come all the way from Heal's in Tottenham Court Road, London, a complimentary piece to the Alvar Aalto Finmar dining suite, occasional tables and chairs that we all took for granted as permanent fixtures of timeless modernity. The fluffy draft excluders at the foot of the smooth wooden doors did their best to keep the heat in, as we did, diligently pulling their D-shaped Bakelite handles to close them with a sensual click of the metal sphere rolling into place within the doorframe.

Along the hall opposite the kitchen, creative odours of turps and oil paint were reluctant to clear the studio, whose cheery aspect looked into the front rockery garden. A compact room that opened up like a painter's art box, a fountain of hidden and visible distractions and amusements. Crowding the top shelf of the glass bookcase like an aviary were my dad's childhood balsa wood and plastic model aircraft, miniatures of Britain's aeronautical engineering zenith. Patrolling the lines of books, dwarfed by Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* and the red monolith of *Who's Who*, my uncle's wooden waterline naval vessels. Under the fold-away writing table, from the bottom drawers we could pull out the clockwork railway set and piece the track together around the drawing board and upright piano. In the cupboard under the stairs, an overwhelming stack of frames, canvases, a cricket bat, fishing rod, a snorkel and flippers, officer's sword and an air-rifle. A glory hole of smells: decaying leather and rubber. I revelled in seeing my sons' eyes light up as mine did nearly forty years earlier. Dressed in camouflage, prone on the grass, I taught them marksmanship in the garden and took them to fishing beats on

the river and lochs where I had similarly returned without a catch. The thrills of body surfing on the blue Crest plywood board were more successful, running over the yellow ochre dunes at Dunnet and into the goosebump-inducing ultramarine rollers of the Pentland Firth.

Linen and a faint hint of mothballs scented the upstairs hallway. A patch of carpet lay in opposite direction to the rest, a ghostly footprint. Grandma's handmade circular rug in beige, with dark brown ripples and rust orange modernist pattern, signed 'Chris', lay on the section of black wood flooring leading to the bathroom. The large window looked out onto the street, the rookery in the trees that lined the stone wall to the school academy that my grandpa designed, one of his and his father's many civic commissions shaping the town and county. The doors upstairs were in pastel colours with matching door handles, designed to create a warmer, softer effect.

The perfumed guest room, the birthplace of my uncle, became my parents' bedroom when we stayed as a family, then as an adult I had the displeasure of the back-aching bed. The window offered a distant view of the sea through the town rooftops and spires. Remnants of a bar of Imperial Leather soap waited for a final scrubbing on the green sink. I imagine the chunky chrome hot and cold taps are probably the same at The Savoy. In the mirror I'd watch my dad shave with childhood wonderment of what it meant to be a man, a rare nick of blood from the safety razor, a liberal splash of *Après Rasage pour homme*.

Meanwhile in the master bedroom, my grandpa utilised the convenience of an electric shaver, and in contrast I'd regard the intricate cleaning process like cleaning a weapon with wire brushes. The back wall of beautifully crafted built-in drawers and cupboards were tinged with an

assortment of foot powders and talc to ameliorate occasional bouts of psoriasis that affected my grandpa after the war. He rarely spoke of the war, but with jovial calls in a French accent of 'Attention, attention!' he'd re-enact some messroom memory to bring us to the dining table. In contrast, in private, he battled a bitter post-war memory of pleading German women as he reluctantly followed orders to relinquish a town to Russian control. Yet we enjoyed filling the air of our home with Pavlova, Stroganoff, Prokofiev, Khachaturian, and Stravinsky. A portrait in uniform, evidence of his war service sat alongside another family photograph, in memorial to my grandma's brother, shot down in a Blenheim over France shortly after he cradled Robin, his new baby nephew. Forty years later, as we scattered in search of Airman Gordon Forsyth, it was dad's inner compass that found his uncle's tombstone in the military cemetery in Arras.

The bathroom was a striking combination of yellow bathroom suite and black linoleum. The medicated paper sheets in the porcelain dispenser gave the room a reassuring antiseptic whiff. The bath was long and deep, and when full of our gangly legs, we could stretch out and pretend to paddle with the bathing brush. A chip on the lip of the sink revealed the metal beneath the enamel, a record of where my dad had slipped as a boy and forever altered his smile. The last time I lay outstretched in that steaming bath, discoloured with rust, I floated, briefly weightless before submerging myself in our past.

The boys' bedroom was the smallest. Without a sink, it featured a commanding mahogany wardrobe, from which the smell of mothballs from long-abandoned burgundy boarding school blazers and kilts repelled sensitive nosey children who might be inclined to seek lion and

witch. Framed school photographs and class group portraits dating from the mid-1950s tested our recognition skills as we tried to pinpoint dad and uncle from the lines of young men in uniform. One night, after the circus show, my brother moaned in agony as I slept. As I dozed through his stomach complaint I stared sleepily at the pattern of blue printed figures configuring different illusions in the folds and overlaps of the curtains. Seagulls squawked as they swooped over the roof, a pigeon cooed down the chimney, and the jackdaws laughed from across the road. It wasn't until I returned from a morning lounging on the beach, looking for lunch, that I found that he had been rushed to hospital in Wick with acute appendicitis. Guilt, a familiar feeling common among brothers, spread as the severity and quick-witted action of the family doctor was explained down the phone to our parents at the other end of the country.

No one talks of the time when the circus came to Thurso. I'd never seen my grandpa so excited, like a schoolboy on the edge of his seat for the spectacle of the town's first visiting elephant. Its meaning only dawned later: it was the privilege we shared. A new family now occupies Hillcroft, as I curate my Proustian memories, other unspoken thoughts and memories are now shut away as a backdraft gently closes the door.