

An excerpt from *Permanent Residence*, a novel in progress by Joanna Lilley.

If Laura hadn't had a boyfriend whose home she could go to, she'd have told her parents she had too many essays to write to be able to go home for Christmas. They'd have believed her; they knew nothing about university. She'd have stayed in her room in the empty halls of residence alone, the entire building, the whole of London, to herself. But she did have a boyfriend. She had Ben Nightingale. And they were on their way to his family home in Brighton on the train. He'd invited her because couples spent Christmas together and because Laura may have mentioned a little too often that she was perfectly happy staying in London on her own and volunteering at the Peckham soup kitchen. She had tracked Ben, hunted him, and he was oblivious. It took five weeks from finding the courage to speak to him as he stood ordering drinks at the student union bar to a turning of the head for a kiss by the Thames, where she'd led him because she told him she wanted to see what his obsession with rowing was all about.

They'd decided on the train to walk to Ben's house rather than ring one of his siblings for a lift, even though they were carrying backpacks full of presents and textbooks. The cold wind blowing up from the sea was pushing them along from behind. Laura grabbed Ben's hand and they ran, backpacks jackhammering against their heads.

"I love London," Laura said, as soon as they slowed and caught their breath. "But I miss the sea, having all that space."

"That's what the river is to me," Ben said. "The sea is almost too big. It unnerves me."

They'd grown up thirty-five miles apart on the Sussex coast. Ben was a sea dipper, Laura had discovered, not a swimmer. Even so, there must have surely been moments when they were in the same body of water simultaneously. During the summer holidays, she and her little sister Theresa spent hours in the sea until their fingertips and heels whitened and withered.

"What unnerves me," Laura told him, "is meeting your family. I hope they like me."

"They'll love you. We're not the Addams Family."

"More like the Waltons?" said Laura. "Or maybe the Jacksons. Or, how about the Ewings?"

"Seriously, though," Ben said, "Don't let them, you know." He faltered.

"Don't let them what?"

"Well, they're all much more interesting than I am."

Laura laughed. "How intriguing." She ran again and left him behind.

While Ben searched for his door key, Laura looked up at the house: grand, white, three storeys, a black wrought iron balcony along the windows on the first floor. The bright green bushes either side of the front door gave the impression it was April not December. The house, on a quiet crescent, was the middle of three in a grouping

designed to look like a single building, giving the effect of a mansion, a stately home. Regency, built in 1827, Ben had told Laura a few weeks ago, finding out as much as she could before he noticed how many questions she was asking. Behind them across the road large, stately trees flourished within the protection of a gated, semi-circular park. She recognized oaks at least, even without their leaves.

“Gosh,” she said. She was still practising her goshes, getting used to the haughty feel of them in her mouth. If she’d ever said gosh at school in Bognor, her home town, she’d have been laughed at for the rest of the year. “It’s such a lovely house.”

Ben didn’t respond. He was probably used to people saying that and, anyway, he was still looking for his keys. Laura gazed up at the house again, pushing her head against her backpack. If she’d grown up here, she would have picked a room on the top floor, despite it having the smallest windows. Way up there, surely, she’d have a view of the sea. She’d known this before they arrived but she definitely knew it now; no way would she ever let Ben visit her parents’ poky ex-council house with its rain-washed bricks and mean little plastic windows.

The door opened while Ben was still fumbling. A tall, lean girl – young woman – stood in the doorway, wearing an ankle-length green skirt, her brown hair collected on top of her head in artistic disarray. Hilary, Ben’s sister. The person Laura had seen helping him move into the halls of residence just before term started. That had been the moment she first saw Ben, just as her father turned the steering wheel into a space in the university carpark. A man-boy. Older than her, she’d assumed, in the second or third year. Tall and straight-backed as if nothing had ever knocked his confidence and never would. Short brown hair, though not short enough to get rid of the wave in it. His nose, a little snubbed. A flash of brown eyes she found herself immediately looking away from, even though, really, she wanted him to catch her looking.

He was taking a cardboard box out of the boot of a black Golf and turned to look at Laura as she clambered out of her parents’ red Fiesta. She’d thought he was about to smile at her, then realized his cheeks were shaped that way all the time. She had to keep hold of the door so she didn’t gush to the ground like an overturned bucket of water. All while her mother was saying, inanely, how big the halls of residence were.

A young woman strode ahead of Ben with a bin liner taut with bedding, presumably. His girlfriend, Laura had assumed then. Her hair piled up just like now. She was wearing a long burgundy skirt that day and a black off-the-shoulder top so a black bra strap showed. The ravaged look, Laura and her friend Mandy at school had called it. Compared to Hilary, Laura looked like a member of a Christian youth club, always up for a Scrabble tournament, in her frumpy pink shirt and too blue jeans. Even though Laura had done something about that, Hilary was making her feel the same way again right now.

“I would have picked you up from the station, baby brother,” said Hilary, her brow fetchingly wrinkled. She was telling him off and Laura could see from his face he’d have been disappointed if she hadn’t.

From a movement of her arms, Laura thought Hilary was going to hug her and she leant forward a little but Hilary reached past her, embracing Ben instead.

"We wanted to walk," Ben said as they hugged. "This is Laura. Obviously. Laura, this is Hilary. Obviously."

"I remember you." Hilary said to Laura. "When I dropped Ben off. In the carpark. I remember your immaculate hair." She reached to touch Laura's bob. Laura stepped away instinctively and Hilary shaped the air with her hand instead, laughing. Laura smiled. She was trying. "You were wearing a pink shirt," Hilary said.

Laura smiled harder. The shirt she'd taken to a charity shop a few days later, along with the jeans. She hadn't worn pink since and she never would. This time, she was wearing black trousers, a grey sweater and black boots that had even more lace holes than Hilary's. She knew the smooth, fair bob didn't go with the disaffected student look she was trying to engineer, and she knew Hilary was thinking the same thing. She wasn't ready to give up the bob, though, not yet.

She followed Ben through the front door and shrugged her backpack onto the polished floorboards in the hall next to his. She could feel the warm glow coming from the red rug, the yellows and oranges in two abstract paintings and a slapdash bunch of what must have been forced daffodils in a vase on the hall table.

"Mummy and Daddy are in the garden," Hilary said. "I'm watching television in the sitting room. *White Christmas* is on. I'm lying down because I've got a headache."

*Mummy and Daddy*. Would Ben call them that as well? Laura hoped so, just to hear it. Hilary had the same accent as Ben's, of course. The non-accent of families raised on broadsheet newspapers, foreign food and Radio Four. There was accent and then there was vocabulary: sitting room not lounge, television not telly. She had been learning from Ben. He was a poor teacher though; he failed to correct her when she got it wrong. He didn't understand how much it mattered. He didn't have to, because he always got it right.

They followed Hilary into a square, high-ceilinged kitchen that had a wooden airer hanging from the ceiling. Laura had seen kitchens like this in films. Through the window, which was grubby, the garden was crowded with shrubs and trees. She couldn't even see where it ended. Her parents' back garden had an oblong of bare lawn as neat as a carpet, three sparse fruit bushes, a couple of reluctant fuchsias and a quadriplegic cherry tree. The Nightingale's garden contained an ornate greenhouse built against a high, dilapidated brick wall, with green algae on the glass that looked older than the house. It was . Laura could hear her mother saying, That needs some work, and pressed her lips together to stop herself from saying anything similar.

Hilary opened the back door and called, "Ben's here!" She filled the kettle and plonked it on the Aga and left the kitchen. Back to *White Christmas*, Laura assumed, until she heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Hilary certainly hadn't looked as if she had a headache. Laura smiled at Ben and he raised his eyebrows back.

"She never has homecomings," he told her. "She's at art college here."

She didn't tell him she knew that. Laura remembered everything he told her about his family. She hadn't asked him why Hilary had stayed at home to do her degree, not yet. She would though. Surely plenty of other art colleges in England were as good. Nobody stayed at home to do their degree unless they had to.

The back door opened and *Mummy* came in.

"Welcome home and welcome!" She kicked off her Wellington boots and left them lying on the floor where they'd fallen with a soft thud. She eased off an old jacket with a torn pocket and hung it on a peg by the back door, then trod towards them in thick white socks with mud around the tops, holding out her arms so Ben and Laura would both fit into her hug. "You should have rung for a lift," she said, releasing them.

Tall like her daughter and almost as slim, Ben's mother had a long, strong nose that was a little hooked. Dark skin around her eyes made her look tired but the eyes themselves were large and brown and lovely.

"I was supposed to do all this weeks ago, clearing leaves and dead stuff and turning the compost," she told them. "Not sure where autumn went. Suddenly it's Christmas Eve."

"It's lovely to meet you, Mrs Nightingale," Laura said. "This is such a wonderful house."

"A bugger to keep warm but, yes, we like it. Call me Sarah, please."

"Any grub, Mum?" Ben opened the fridge. So he didn't call her Mummy, not in front of Laura anyway.

When Sarah had instructed Ben on what food was permissible to eat before Christmas, she turned to Laura. Laura put a hand on the large table to support herself under the scrutiny. She could feel a deep ridge in the wood like a knife cut. Five-year-old Hilary having a temper tantrum perhaps.

"Have you just come from your parents, Laura?"

"No, we came straight down from London."

"You'll go over to them tonight? They're in Bognor Regis?"

Laura rarely heard anyone use the town's full name. "Yes, but actually I thought I'd see them after Christmas instead."

"Oh." Sarah seemed surprised. "Trains start running again on Boxing Day I think. I've got an old timetable somewhere." She opened a drawer.

"Thanks," Laura said to Sarah's tall back. Her long black hair had strands of grey and was tied loosely with a green scrunchie. A couple of long curving hairs were stuck to her navy fisherman's sweater which Laura resisted picking off, though she was close enough. She'd meant after Christmas as in Easter, not Boxing Day.

"I'd really prefer you to go to your parents for Christmas and come to us afterwards." Sarah jerked her hand through the drawer, her back still turned. "There's still time to get there today, I'm sure."

"Laura isn't as close to her parents as we are." Ben put bread, cheese and salad on the table. Laura could tell he was avoiding looking at her.

"Even so," Sarah said. "Christmas is a time to put your own feelings aside. Parents want their children home for Christmas."

"Mum, she's staying with us." Ben shook his head a little at Laura as if to say don't worry. "We'll go there on our way back to London. Laura isn't blessed with a happy, harmonious family like we are."

Sarah harrumphed at that. She turned back towards them with a dog-eared train timetable booklet in her hand. "It's two years out of date." She sounded perplexed. She handed it to Laura.

"Thanks," Laura said.

Ben took it from her. "Of archival interest I'm sure. Let's offer it up to the great recycler in the sky, shall we?" He dropped it on top of a pile of paper filling up a plastic tub by the back door.

Sarah laughed and Laura felt more relaxed. Her laugh was warm and inviting like the hallway. "You'll have to ring instead. I must have chucked the wrong one out," Sarah said. "Well, eat, you two, then come and help in the garden. We're going to cut down that tree."

"It's got some sort of disease," Ben told Laura, meaning the tree. Laura could see now that he had his mother's large brown eyes.

When Sarah had closed the door on her way back out, Ben said, "They don't get a lot of time, you know, for gardening. They're always working."

His mother was the chief executive of a health trust and Laura could tell. All this talk of trains, she reminded Laura of one, never stopping for long, always moving on with a clear destination.

They put their backpacks back on and Ben reached for Laura's hand to lead her up the three flights of stairs to his bedroom. She'd change into her jeans and borrow some Wellington boots and she'd show Ben's parents how good she was at mucking in. Sarah would see how perfect she was for Ben and wouldn't mention anything again about spending Christmas with her own family. This was the sort of family Laura should have been born into. It would soon be as obvious to the Nightingales as it already was to her.

Laura's hand and soon her whole body were tingling from Ben's touch as they went upstairs. She completely loved him. She had never been in love until she met Ben. She'd only kissed two boys before him and taken part in some exploratory touching. It was hard at school to transform yourself from *Wally Watkins*, school swot, into someone anyone would want to go out with. Two wasn't bad, considering.

Laura dropped her backpack onto Ben's single bed and sat down next to it. She laughed.

"What?" Ben sat next to her, kissing her before she could answer.

"I'm eighteen and I'm still waiting for the birds and the bees talk."

"Seriously?"

"I had to learn on my own. Your parents told you?"

"My father sat me down when I was, golly, I don't know. Five?"

"That's young." Too young, she was thinking, although Ben wasn't as assiduous with his memories as she was with hers.

"Probably trying to beat my brothers to it."

"I'm the one who told my sister," Laura said. "When she was nine. I had to make sure she knew in case her periods started or her friends told her things and scared her."

"You told Theresa the facts of life?"

It was sweet that he remembered her name, even though Laura didn't talk about her family much.

“My mum wasn’t ever going to do it and when I told my father he’d have to tell her, he was embarrassed so I told him I would. When my periods started, I had to go into Boots and buy my first tampons on my own.”

Ben looked a little uncomfortable at her easy mention of periods. He frowned sympathetically and put his arm round her, though. “Poor you.” He pulled her towards him and they kissed for a long time.

Laura lay in Ben’s bed on Christmas morning and curved her toes until they began to cramp, a strange compulsion she’d had since she was a child, to clench her feet until she felt pain. She could hear music, classical. Piano. The idea of waking up in her parents’ house and hearing classical music made her giggle. She slid a foot across the mattress. Ben wasn’t there. She opened her eyes. He wasn’t in the room at all.

The music faltered and started again. Not a CD. Someone was actually playing the piano. That made her stop laughing, being in a house where people had accomplishments like knowing how to play the piano. Not surprisingly, she didn’t recognize the tune. She wondered if it was Chopin, the only composer she could think of.

Ben was probably getting cups of tea, carrying them carefully all the way up three flights of stairs. They had a tea and biscuit ritual whenever they spent the night with each other. Jammy Dodgers or Golden Crunch Creams. Laura wondered what kind of biscuits there were in the Nightingale kitchen. From the Waitrose luxury biscuit section perhaps. Not home-made. No one had time. When Ben came back up she would give him his Christmas present, tickets to the National Theatre, which were for her too, of course, to save embarrassment if he hadn’t bought her anything. They hadn’t made love last night which had surprised her. There was no problem with them both sleeping in Ben’s room, because his parents were liberal, not like her parents. Although his mother did get a camp bed up from the cellar that looked as if it had served in the Second World War. She handed it to Ben who dutifully carried it upstairs and even asked his mother where the spare sleeping bags were kept these days.

Laura thought she’d be the one who felt awkward yet he had been fidgety as she changed into the over-sized t-shirt she wore for bed. He stood looking at things in his room as if he’d been away for years, not just one term, as if he was waiting for her to fall asleep before he got in.

She lay, now, for some time listening. She assumed Hilary was playing. She was the artistic one. Marcus, the eldest at twenty-four, worked for the Labour Party in London. Something to do with working on the campaign for the election next year. Alex was training to be an architect with a firm in Bristol. Ben’s father was an architect too, here in Brighton. Apparently the father and son were talking about setting up their own firm when Alex was qualified. Both brothers had come home for Christmas. Neither had brought a girlfriend and Hilary, Ben told Laura, didn’t have a boyfriend. Not currently. There were many questions Laura wanted to ask Ben about Hilary. She restrained herself though; she didn’t want to appear obsessed.

Laura got dressed, stopping often to look out of the window down at the messy back garden and the pale stump of the tree Ben’s father had chopped down yesterday

while they all watched, even Hilary. Laura would have become a different person, growing up in this house, in this family, this garden. She would have known what this music was. She would have known when to say Mum and when to say Mummy. Even if she spent the rest of her life with Ben, which was what she was intending to do, she would never be like him. She would always be just a cleverish girl from a council estate.

She had been planning to go to the kitchen, where she would no doubt find Ben eating breakfast seeing as tea and biscuits had never arrived. Instead, when she got to the ground floor hall, the piano music drew her towards the sitting room.

It wasn't Hilary playing, it was one of the brothers. All the boys had dark hair, Laura had learnt when she met them last night; she couldn't quite tell who it was from the back. Ben was the most beautiful but they were all dark-haired and, she had to admit, attractive. Only because they were part of Ben. She felt uneasy, disloyal, being attracted to anyone except him. It wasn't sexual exactly, it was part of the allure of the whole family. Except Hilary. No allure there, although even she was fascinating to watch and, admittedly, pretty. The confident Nightingale bearing, the clever banter, the physical ease inside this grand yet comfortable house. Laura had to keep making herself look away from them so they catch her staring.

She'd met both brothers last night. Alex had suddenly appeared in the sitting room and they'd all stood up for hugs. Laura hugged Alex too, sliding her hand down the cold leather of his sheepskin coat. He was shorter, slighter than Ben and he had narrower shoulders.

Marcus came home later on while Ben and Laura were in the kitchen making tea and raiding the mince pies. Laura was thinking but not saying how amazed she was that it was possible to spend a whole evening talking with your family which was what they were doing and how much fun it was. Laura had turned when she'd heard someone enter the room and they'd looked at each other, for less than a second probably, before either of them said anything. Marcus's hair was darker than Ben's, almost black, and it was straight, making Ben's curls look boyish. He was shorter than Ben too, like Alex, but he was more solid and his shoulders were the broadest.

It was nothing like when she'd seen Ben that first time in the carpark, but it was definitely something. She was just glad that Ben was reaching for plates and nobody else was there.

She wasn't usually like this. She never flirted. She was averagely attractive. Not overweight, regularly proportioned. Her neat, fair hair was an asset but she certainly didn't seek – or get – the type of attention some of the girls at school had received from boys, although she suspected attention was in direct proportion to how girls behaved. Which was fine with her considering she didn't want to get pregnant and end up as a single mother on a council estate. Before she slept with Ben, even before they were an item, she'd gone to the doctor for a prescription for the pill.

Now, as she stood watching, the music slowed to a stop and the pianist turned. Not Alex or Marcus. It was Ben.

"I didn't know you could play the piano." Laura's anger surprised her. She stood in the doorway, one hand on the edge of the door, pushing the latch in with her palm. It wasn't anger; it was jealousy.

"Bit rusty." Ben beckoned her in. "I haven't played all term. Happy Christmas by the way."

"Happy Christmas. You're brilliant."

"No, very mediocre. Only just scraped my grade six, then I gave up."

"How many grades are there?"

"Eight." He was obviously surprised she didn't know.

Laura looked at the sheet music to see who the composer was. At least she knew enough to do that. Beethoven. No doubt she should have recognized it. "Why are you doing history and not a music degree?" She stood beside him and put an arm across his shoulders.

Ben laughed and pulled her down to sit on his lap. "That's sweet of you but this is just a hobby. Something you do as a child."

"Not in my case."

He looked disconcerted. "You should hear Alex. He's the one with the talent. Grade eight with distinction. We'll get him to play. He's into boogie-woogie."

Laura wasn't going to admit she didn't know what boogie-woogie was. I'd rather hear Marcus, she thought but didn't say. She wondered what his talents were.