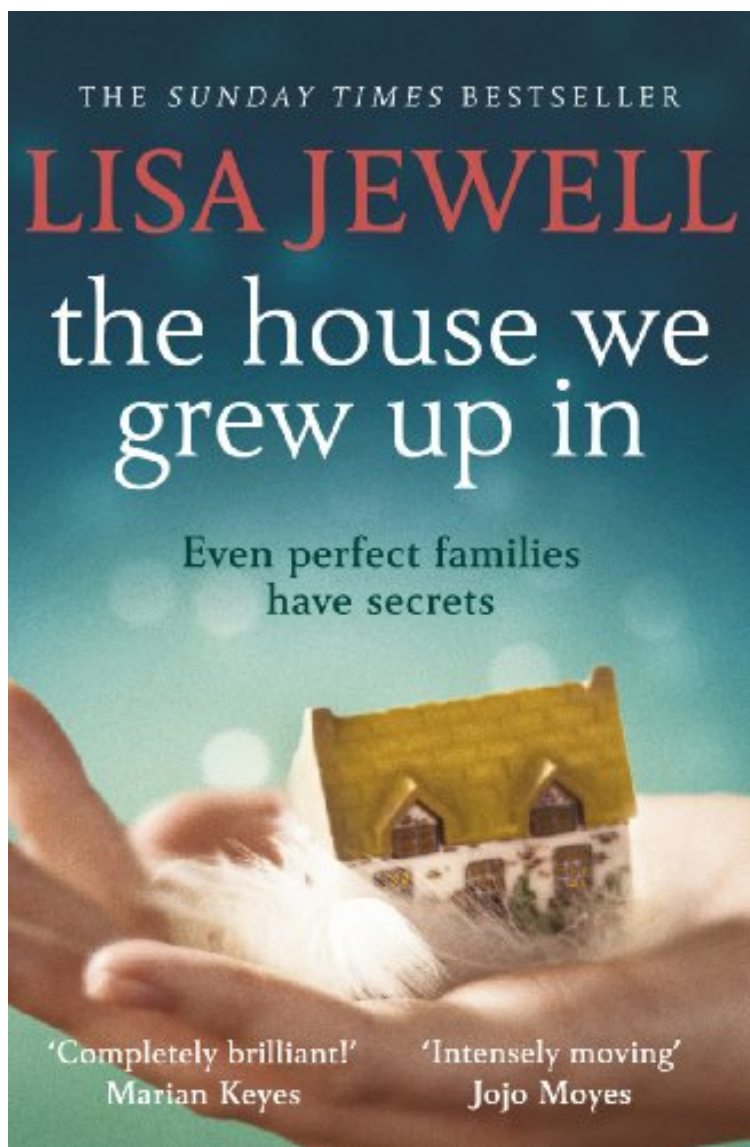


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The House We Grew Up In



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe unforgettable story about a family with a secret at its core, from Top Ten bestseller Lisa Jewell, author of Ralph's Party, The Making of Us and Before I Met You. When a tragedy breaks a family apart, what can bring it back together?The Birds seem to be the perfect family: mother, father, four children, a picture-book cottage in the country.But when something happens one Easter weekend, it is so unexpected, so devastating, that no one can talk about it.The family shatters, seemingly for ever.Until they are forced to return to the house they grew up in. And to confront what really took place all those years ago.ExtraitThe House We Grew Up In 1 Tuesday 2nd November 2010 Hi, Jim! Well, I must say, I didnt think for a minute youd be called something earthy like Jim! The Barbour and natty waistcoat in your

profile photo make you look more like a Rupert or a Henry, something serious with two syllables, you know! And talking of syllables, and since you asked, no, Im not really called Rainbowbelle. OF COURSE NOT! Im called Lorelei and my name has three or four syllables, depending on how you say it. (My parents named us after mythical maidens. My sister is called Pandora. There was an Athena, but she was stillborn, so you know.) Anyway. Lor-a-lay-ee. Or Lor-a-lay. Im not fussy really. Im sixty-five years old and I live in one of the prettiest villages in the Cotswolds in a big, crazy old house full of what I call TREASURES and what my children call CRAP. We are probably ALL right. I have four children. Megan is forty, Bethan is thirty-eight and the twins, Rory and Rhys, are thirty-five. Oh, and thanks mainly to the frantic reproduction of my eldest daughter I am a multiple grandmother too! Do you have any children? You didnt mention them so I assume not? People usually tell you about their children before anything else, right? I dont see them very much, unfortunately, theyre all so busy, and Im, well, I suppose you could say insular these days. I lost my partner about four years ago and things kind of unraveled from there, you might say. Anyway, what can I tell you about me? I love nature, I love the countryside, I love children, I love to swim. Im fit, for my age. Ive kept my figure over the years, and am grateful for that. I see some women Ive known for many years just turn to woolly mammoths once they pass menopause! And, as you can see from my picture, Ive kept my hair long. Nothing ages a woman faster than a haircut!! Anyway, thats enough about me. Tell me more about you! You say youre a widower. Im very sorry to hear that. And whereabouts in the North do you live? I can see from your photo that you have a dog. That is a very beautiful retriever. What is it called? We had a dog when the children were growing up, but once theyd all gone, I could never quite see the point of animals. I will see what I can do about photographs. Im not really very techy beyond my laptop. But there must be something else I can send you. Ill check it out. Well, thank you, Jim, for getting in touch. The Internet really is a marvelous thing, especially for old codgers like us, wouldnt you say? Id be lost without it really. Id love to hear back from you again, but please dont feel you have to, if you think I sound dreadful!! Yours with best wishes, Lorelei Bird April 2011

The damp heat came as a shock after the chill of the air-conditioning that had cooled the car for the last two hours. Meg slammed the door behind her, pushed up the sleeves of her cotton top, pulled down her sunglasses and stared at the house. Jesus Christ. Molly joined her on the pavement, and gawped from behind lime-green Ray-Bans. Oh, my God. They stood together for a moment, side by side, the same height as each other now. Molly had caught up last summer, much to her delight. They now both stood at five foot eight. Molly long and lean as a fashion drawing, tanned legs in denim hot pants, honey-dusted hair bundled on top of her head in an artful pile, white Havaianas, a chambray shirt over a pink tank top, tiny ankles and wrists layered in friendship circlets and rubber bands. Meg, on the other hand, solid as a quarterback, sensible in three-quarter-length navy chinos and a Breton-striped long-sleeved top, a pair of silver-sequined FitFlops and a last-minute pedicure her only concession to the unseasonal heat wave. Mother and only daughter, in the late stages of a nightmarish, clichd teenage disaster that had lasted more than three years. Almost friends now. Almost. Someone had once told Meg that you get your daughter back when shes nineteen. Only four more years to wait. This is worse than I thought. I mean, so much worse. Meg shook her head and took a tentative step towards the house. There it stood, brick for brick, exactly as it had been the day she was born, forty years earlier. Three low windows facing out onto the street; four windows above; two front doors, one at either end; on the right by the side entrance a plaque, made by a long-dead local craftsman, an oval with the words The Bird House painted on it and a pair of lovebirds with their beaks entwined. The green-painted gate to the left of the house that opened up onto a graveled path to the back door, the stickers in the windows declaring membership of Neighborhood Watch (whatever happened to Neighborhood Watch? Meg wondered idly), allegiance to the RSPB and an intolerance towards people selling door-to-door. All there, just as it had been forever and ever. Except... This is the worst house Ive ever seen, said Molly. Its worse than the ones on the TV shows. We havent even been inside yet, Moll, hold that thought. And my nose too, right? Yes, probably. She sighed. The windows, which to her recollection had never been cleaned, were now so thick with grime that they were fully opaque. In fact, they were black. The pastel-yellow Gloucester brick was discolored and damaged. The green gate was hanging off its post by one solitary nail and the graveled pathway was piled high with random objects: two old pushchairs, a rusty bike, a dead Christmas tree in a broken pot, a box of magazines swollen and waterlogged to twice their original size. The flat-fronted style of the house meant that it held most of its personality within and behind, but even on such scant display, it was clear that this house had a disease. The village had grown more and more gentrified over the decades, all the old houses scrubbed to a gleaming yellow, doors and window frames Farrow--Balled to the nth degree, and there, lodged between them, like a rotten tooth, sat

the Bird House. God, its so embarrassing, said Molly, pushing her Ray-Bans into her hair and wrinkling her tiny nose. What must everyone think? Meg raised her eyebrows. Hmm, she said, Id say that judging by our local reputation this is probably no more than anyone in the village would expect. Come on then she smiled at her daughter, nervously lets go in, shall we? Get it over with? Molly smiled back grimly and nodded.

April 1981 Megan pulled back the ivy and pushed her fingertips inside a small crevice in the wall. Got another one! she shouted out to Bethan and the twins. Oh, well done, Meggy! her mother called from the back step, where she stood in her strawberry-print apron watching proceedings with a contented smile. Bravo! Megan pulled out the small foil-wrapped egg and dropped it into her basket. Its pink! she said pointedly to her younger sister. Dont care, said Bethan. Ive got three pink ones already. Megan looked up at the sky; it was cloudless, densely blue, hot as July. Mum had said they needed to find their eggs quickly, otherwise they might melt. Her eyes scanned the gardens. Shed found all the eggs in the woodpile, gingerly plucking them from next to rubbery woodlice. Thered been more in the beds of daffodils and hyacinths that lined the pathways around the greenhouse and shed come across a big gold one sitting in the branches of the cherry tree outside the kitchen door. She counted up her eggs and found she had twelve. Bethan and the twins were still searching close to the house, but Megan suspected that the top garden had been all but stripped of its egg assets, so she skipped down the slate-covered steps to the lower garden. Suddenly the sounds of her siblings and her mother faded to a murmur. It was warmer down here, soft and hazy. The grass had stripes in it, from where Dad had mown it yesterday, this way and that, and little piles of shaggy grass trimmings already turning pale in the burning sun. A camellia bush, confused by the early summer, had already bloomed and spilled its fat blossoms onto the lawn, where they lay browning and sated, halfway to ugly. Megan headed to the lichen-spotted sundial in the middle of the lawn. Three more foil-wrapped eggs sat on top of it and she brushed them into her basket with the side of her hand. She heard Bethan tripping down the steps behind her in her flamenco shoes. Megan turned and smiled. Sometimes when she looked at her little sister she felt overcome with love. Her worst enemy and her best friend. Meg and Beth looked identical. They both had what her mother called the Bird face. It was the same as her dads and the same as her auntie Lornas and the same as Granny Birds. Apple cheeks, high foreheads, wide smiles. The only difference was that Megans hair was brown and curly like Mums, and Bethans was straight and black like Dads. Rory and Rhys, the twins, looked like their mum. They had Douglas faces. Low foreheads, long noses, neat bee-stung lips, and narrow blue eyes peering curiously from behind curtains of long blond hair. People always said, Oh, such lovely-looking children. They said, You must be so proud, Mrs. Bird. They said, What perfect angels. And Mum would say, You should see them when theyre at home, and roll her eyes, with one hand running through Rorys hair, the other wrapped around Rhyss hand and her voice full of love. How many have you got? Meg called out to her sister. Eleven. How about you? Fifteen. Their mother appeared at the bottom of the steps with the twins in tow. The boys have got nine each, I think were almost there, she said. Think yellow, she added with an exaggerated wink. The boys let go of her hands and ran towards the slide at the bottom of the garden that had yellow handles. Bethan ran towards an upturned bucket that was actually orange. But Megan knew exactly where her mother meant. The Saint-Johns-wort bush right in front of them. She walked towards it and let her eyes roam over the clouds of yellow flowers abuzz with fat bumblebees before they came to rest on a row of terra-cotta pots underneath, overflowing with eggs and small yellow puffball chicks with glued-on eyes. She was about to scoop up the eggs and chicks when her mother touched her on her shoulder, her soft dry hands firm against Megs sun-freckled skin. Share them, she whispered softly, with the little ones. Make it fair. Meg was about to complain but then she took a deep breath and nodded. Here! she called out to her siblings. Look! Theres millions. All three hurtled to the Saint-Johns-wort bush and their mother divided up the remaining eggs into four piles and handed them to each child in turn.

Already starting to melt, she said, licking some chocolate from the edge of her thumb, better get them indoors. The cool of the house was shocking after the heat outside. It draped itself over Megs bare skin like a cold flannel. Dad was pouring juice into beakers at the kitchen table. The dog was dozing on the window seat. The yellow walls of the kitchen were entirely covered over with the childrens art. Megan ran her finger along the edges of a drawing that shed done when she was four. It always amazed her to think it had been stuck to the wall there, in the very same place, with the very same piece of Sellotape, for six whole years. She could barely remember being four. She certainly could not remember sitting and drawing this portrait entitled megn and mummy, composed of two string-legged people with crazy hair, split-in-half smiles and hands twice the size of their bodies, suspended in a gravity-free world of spiky blue trees and floating animals. The wall of art was a conversation piece for anyone coming into the house; it spanned all three

walls, spread itself over cupboard doors, over door frames, around corners and even into the pantry. Dad would try and take some down occasionally, to update the wall as hed put it. But Mum would just smile her naughty-little-girl smile and say, Over my dead body. If Dad ever saw one of his children producing a piece of art hed snatch it away the moment it was shown to him and say, That is so very beautiful that I shall have to put it in my special folder, and spirit it away somewhere (occasionally tucked inside his clothes) before Mum saw it and stuck it to the wall. Now, she said, pulling her tangly hair back into a ponytail and removing her apron, you can eat all the eggs you like as long as you promise youll still have room for lunch. And remember, keep the foils for the craft box! The craft box was another bugbear of Dads. It had once been a small plastic toolbox neatly filled with sequins and pipe cleaners and sheets of gold leaf. Over the years it had expanded into an ever-growing family of giant plastic crates that lived in a big cupboard in the hall, filled with an impossible tangle of old string lengths, knots of wool, empty sweet wrappers, toilet-roll middles, old underwear cut into rags, packing chips and used wrapping paper. Megan didnt really do crafts anymore she was nearly eleven now and Bethan had never been as creative as her sister, while the boys of course would rather be roaming the gardens or charging about the house than sitting with a tube of Pritt and a handful of old ice-lolly sticks. No one really used the craft box anymore, but that didnt stop Lorelei constantly topping it up with all sorts of old junk. She pulled the egg foils eagerly from the children now as they discarded them, smoothing them flat with her fingertips into delicate slivers, her face shining with satisfaction. So pretty, she said, piling them together, like little slices of rainbow. And of course, they will always make me think of today. This perfect day with my lovely children when the sun shone and shone and all was right with the world. She looked at each child in turn and smiled her smile. She ran a hand over Rhys hair and stroked it from his eyes. My lovely children, she said again, her words encompassing all four of them, but her loving gaze fixed firmly upon her last-born child. Rhys had been the smallest of all of Loreleis babies. Megan and Bethan had both weighed over nine pounds. Rory had been the first twin out, weighing in at a healthy six pounds and fifteen ounces. And then, as her mother often recounted, out popped poor Rhys like a plucked quail, a little under four pounds, blue and wrinkled and just about able to breathe on his own. Theyd put him under lights or lightly toasted him, as Lorelei also often recounted and declared him fit to go home only after three long days. Lorelei still worried about him more than the other three. At just six years old he was smaller than Rory, smaller than most of the children in his class, with a pale complexion and a tendency to catch colds and tummy bugs. He clung to his mother whenever they were out in public, wailed like a baby when he got hurt and, unlike his brother, didnt like playing with other children. He seemed happy only when he was here, at home, brother on one side, mother on the other. Megan didnt know what to make of him. Sometimes she wished hed never been born. Sometimes she really thought theyd be better off without him. He didnt match. All the Birds were fun and gregarious, silly and bright. Rhys just dragged them down. Megan unthinkingly squeezed her fist around the gold foil that shed just unpeeled from the big egg shed found in the cherry tree, and jumped slightly as her mothers hand slapped down against hers. Foil! Lorelei cried. Foil! She immediately let her fist fall open and her mother took the crumpled foil with a smile. Thank you, darling, she said sweetly. She let her gaze fall on the foil and said, Look at it, so pretty, so shiny, so... happy. The Easter holidays stretched out for another week. The heat wave continued and the Bird children came indoors only for beakers of juice, slices of bread and butter and desperately needed visits to the toilet. Friends came and went, there was a day trip to the beach at Weston-super-Mare, and on the last weekend of the holidays they had a visit from Loreleis sister Pandora and her two teenage sons. Dad filled the paddling pool and the adults drank glasses of Pimms with fruit-shaped plastic ice cubes bobbing about in them. Megans cousin Tom played David Bowie songs on his heavily stickered guitar. Rory burst the paddling pool with a stick and the water seeped heavily onto the lawn, leaving it waterlogged and boggy, and Dad said, Well, thats that then. Lorelei scooped the floppy remains of the punctured pool into her arms like it was an injured child and carried it into the garage murmuring, Dadll fix it up. Dad said, You and I both know that Dad wont fix it up. I have no idea how to fix paddling pools and I still havent fixed the one that got burst last year. And Lorelei smiled and blew him a kiss across the garden. Dad sighed and said, Well. We now have three punctured paddling pools sitting in our garage this house is just a dumping ground, and raised his eyebrows heavenwards. Pandora smiled and said, Just like our dad. He never could throw anything away. Megans other cousin Ben smiled and said, Tell us again about what Lorelei used to collect when she was a child. Pandora frowned and then smiled. Autumn leaves. Ring pulls. Tags from new clothes. Cinema stubs. The silver foil from Mums cigarette packets. And hair! said Ben gleefully. Dont forget the hair. Yes, said Pandora, anytime anyone in our family had a haircut, Lorelei begged to keep it. She had a

shopping bag full of it under her bed. It was quite gruesome. The adults and teenagers laughed and Megan looked at them curiously. Theyd had this conversation before every time they were together, it sometimes seemed and whenever she heard them talking about her mum like this it sounded different. The older she got the less she found it funny and the more she found it peculiar. Because she was now the age that her mother had been at the time of these strange childhood collections and she could no more imagine herself collecting old hair than she could asking to go to school on a Saturday. Are you laughing at me? her mother asked good-naturedly as she returned from the garage. No, no, no! said Ben. Absolutely not. Were just talking about you affectionately. Hmm, said Lorelei, wiping her damp hands down the length of her long denim skirt. I strongly suspect not. And then she spread her arms upwards, revealing unshaved armpits of lush brown curls, and declared, Look at that sky, just look at it. The blueness of it. Makes me want to snatch out handfuls of it and put it in my pockets. Megan saw a look pass over her fathers face at that moment. Love and worry. As though he was aching to say something unspeakable. The look softened as Megan watched and then he smiled and said, If my wife had her way, her pockets would be full of pieces of every single thing in the world. Oh, yes! Lorelei beamed. They would be. Totally and absolutely bulging. Pandora had brought homemade butterfly cakes with fluffed-up cream and more tiny yellow chicks atop. Lorelei served them in the garden with tea from a pot and scones and cream. There was more Pimms and a plastic bowl of strawberries. The twins ran barefoot back and forth from the hosepipe to fill their water pistols, which, after countless tellings-off, they were using to squirt only each other. Tom and Ben had retired to the bottom of the garden to smoke cigarettes in the hammock and share secret jokes together. Megan and Bethan sat side by side, listening to the grown-ups talk. When Megan herself was a grown-up and people came to ask about her childhood, it was afternoons such as these that would impel her to say, My childhood was perfect. And it was. Perfect. They lived in a honey-colored house that sat hard up against the pavement of a picture-postcard Cotswolds village and stretched out beyond into three-quarters of an acre of rambling half-kempt gardens.

Their mother was a beautiful hippy called Lorelei with long tangled hair and sparkling green eyes who treated her children like precious gems. Their father was a sweet gangly man called Colin, who still looked like a teenager with floppy hair and owlish round-framed glasses. They all attended the village school, they ate home-cooked meals together every night, their extended family was warm and clever; there was money for parties and new paddling pools, but not quite enough for foreign travel, but it didnt matter, because they lived in paradise. And even as a child, Megan knew this to be paradise. Because, she could see with hindsight, her mother told her so. Her mother existed entirely in the moment. And she made every moment sparkle. No one in Megans family was ever allowed to forget how lucky they were. Not even for a second. A cloud passed over the sun just then and Lorelei laughed and pointed and said, Look! Look at that cloud! Isnt it wonderful? It looks exactly like an elephant! April 2011 The keys were where Lorelei had always left them, under a cracked plant pot behind a water pipe beneath the kitchen window. Meg pulled them out and dusted the sticky cobwebs from her fingertips. Yuck. The house had been impenetrable by either of its front doors for many years now. The family had always come in and out through the kitchen door at the back and for the last few years Lorelei had been using both hallways at the front as bonus storage areas. Right, Meg said, rejoining Molly by the back door, lets go. Deep breath. She threw her daughter a brave smile and was gratified to see her smile reflected back at her. You okay, Mum? Meg nodded. Of course she was okay. Meg was always okay. Someone had to be and shed been the one to draw that straw. Im fine, love, thank you. Molly peered at her curiously and then took one of her hands in her own and squeezed it gently. Meg almost flinched at the tender power of it. Her daughters touch. Until recently her last memory of her daughters touch had been the sting of a palm across her cheek, the jab of toes against her shins, the drag of fingernails down her arm. It had been that bad. Truly. Everything shed been warned of about teenage girls, squared and squared again. But lately, things had started to change. Lately, it seemed as though her daughter had started to like her again. Thank you, love, she said again. You know you can talk about it, dont you? You know I want to listen. I want to help. Youve lost your mummy. If I lost my mummy, Id... Mollys eyes filled with tears and she smiled through them. Oh, God, well, you know. Meg laughed. I know, baby, I know. But honestly. Im good. Really. Molly squeezed her hand one more time before letting it go. She pulled in her breath theatrically and then nodded at the key in Megs hand. Meg nodded back and fitted it into the lock. She turned the key. She opened the door. March 1986 The sky was dark with rain clouds and in the very far distance, thunder was starting to rumble. The York stone paving slabs were still stained charcoal gray from the last downpour and fat droplets of rain clung tremulously to the edges of leaves and spring blossoms. Behind the cloud was a strip of blue and there on the horizon, the faint beginnings of a rainbow. Lorelei

stood barefoot just outside the kitchen door, wrapped in a long multicolored angora cardigan. Her waist-length hair was twisted and held on her crown with three large tortoiseshell combs. Look, Meggy, she said, her head appearing around the door. Look. A rainbow! Quick! Meg glanced up from her revision, spread before her on the kitchen table, and smiled encouragingly. In a minute, she said. No! cried her mother. It'll be gone in a minute. Come and look now! Meg sighed and rested her pen on her notepad. Okay, she said. She joined her mother outside, feeling the wetness of the flagstones seeping through her sheepskin slippers. Beth! her mother called back into the kitchen. Boys! Come quickly! They're watching telly, said Meg. They won't be able to hear you. Go and get them, will you, darling? They won't come. Of course they will. Quick, darling, run in and tell them. Meg knew it was pointless to argue. She sighed again and headed towards the sitting room. Her three siblings sat in a row on the grubby sofa with the dog lying listlessly between them.

They were watching Saturday Superstore and eating carrot sticks. Mum says there's a rainbow, she said defeatedly. She wants you to go and look at it. No one acknowledged her so she returned to her mother with the bad news. Lorelei sighed melodramatically. That's a terrible pity, she said. And look she gestured at the sky now it's gone. Gone for good. Forever... A small tear rolled down the side of her nose and she wiped it away with a bunched-up fist, the way a small child might do. Such a pity, she murmured, to miss a rainbow... Then she forced her face into a smile and said, Ah well, at least one of you saw it. You can always describe it to the others. Meg smiled tightly. As if, she thought to herself, as if I will sit with my siblings and regale them with descriptions of the red and the yellow and the pink and the green, the awe and the splendor of the purple and the orange and the blue, the miracle of distant prismatic stripes. Yes, she said. Maybe, later. It was still raining the next day. Lorelei insisted on the egg hunt taking place regardless. Let's do it indoors, darling, Colin had suggested gently. No way, Jose! Lorelei had countered. Easter Sunday is egg hunt in the garden. Rain or no rain. Isn't that right, kiddies? Meg looked out towards the garden, through the rain-splattered panes of glass, and thought of her hair, lovingly back-combed that morning into a fat quiff and sprayed hard with Elnett. She thought of the muddy lawn and the cold, wet grass and her canvas pumps, and she thought of her drainpipe jeans that she'd had trouble squeezing into this morning, and the date she was going on next week, for which she planned on being able to wear said jeans, not to mention the troublesome spot forming on her chin. The twins jumped into their Wellington boots and raincoats, while Lorelei ran around in the rain, planting her eggs in the garden. Meg watched her through the window. She looked like a wraith, long and lean, in a cream muslin smock, faded jeans, green Wellingtons and a floppy-brimmed straw hat, her long hair sticking wet to her back, her small breasts growing visible through the fabric of her top as it dampened. Her face was shining with joy as she hopped from spot to spot, plucking eggs from a straw basket held in the crook of her arm. The boys stood in the doorway, bristling with anticipation. Just turned eleven years old they could still be held rapt by Lorelei with her enthusiasm and childlike charm. Her babies, still, just about. Ready, steady, go! she called out a moment later, and the boys hared out onto the lawn, followed more sedately by Bethan in a pink polka-dot raincoat and rubber boots.

Meggy? Her mother stared at her curiously. No eggs? I'll leave them for the others, said Meg, hoping a suggestion of sibling-oriented kindness might prevent further urging. There's lots to go round. Tons and tons. Meg shrugged. I don't want my hair to get wet. Oh, for goodness sake. That's no excuse. Put on a rain cap, here... She pulled a clear plastic hood from a drawer and forced it into Meg's hands. Meg stared at it, aghast. I'm not wearing that! Why on earth not? Because it's an old lady's hat. It is not! It's my hat! Exactly. Lorelei threw her head back and laughed hard. Oh, darling, she said, one day, God willing, you'll be forty too, and I promise you, you will not feel a day over eighteen. Not a day. Now put the hat on and come and have some fun with the little ones. Imagine, she said, her face turning serious for a moment, imagine if something happened to one of us and there was no Easter egg hunt next year, imagine if everything stopped being perfect you would wish so hard that you'd taken part today... Meg stared into the depths of her mother's eyes, the greeny-blue reservoirs of a million fervent emotions. They were set firm. She forced a smile and said, Okay, dragging out the second syllable to demonstrate her sacrifice. She found eleven eggs that morning and gave them all to her siblings. Pandora and her husband, Laurence, arrived at midday, without either of their now-grown-up sons but with a new puppy in tow. Shortly afterwards, Colin's sister Lorna turned up, with a carrier bag full of Easter eggs. Some neighbors were next to arrive, Bob and Jenny and their three young children. Lorelei roasted a leg of lamb in the Aga and served it with far too many honey-glazed carrots (Aren't they the most glorious shade of orange?) and not nearly enough roast potatoes. The children sat at a plastic picnic table at one end of the kitchen while the adults sat together around the antique pine table in the middle. Megan felt lost among the two parties, too old for the children, too young for the adults, not one

person in the room to appreciate her perfectly applied eyeliner or her new Aran cardigan with leather buttons or the fact that she finally got down to eight and a half stone. She didn't like carrots and was toying with the idea of vegetarianism, so she picked daintily at the one roast potato she'd been allocated by her mother (family hold back, darling!) and stared through the window at the incessant rain, fantasizing about her escape. Megan imagined it to be a glorious explosion of glass shards, as she slammed her fists through the invisible walls around her. She imagined fresh air and bright light and dizzying amounts of space. She saw a room with four flat bare walls, a square bed dressed in plain white sheets, a tall window hung with a simple pair of white curtains like the ones in Demi Moore's apartment in *St. Elmos Fire*. She saw a shiny kitchen, gleaming pans, a white bathroom and a quiet man with clean fingernails and a silver guitar. Then she looked around her own kitchen, at the fifteen years worth of children's art lovingly hung and tacked and stuck to the walls, and the thought of escape soured in her heart. She left the children's table and went and sat herself on her father's knee at the grown-ups table, hoping for a return of the sense of the sugary days of her childhood.

He wrapped a gangly arm around her waist and Megan smiled across the table at her mother. You know, Lorrie, their neighbor Jenny was saying, your kitchen really is the loveliest place to be on a grotty day like today. Lorelei smiled and put an arm around her friend. No, it really is. So warm. So welcoming. If I ever found myself stranded on the side of a snowy mountain, freezing to death, I would probably hallucinate about this place. About Lorrie's lovely kitchen. Thank you, said Lorelei, kissing her on her cheek. Meggy thinks the house is a mess, don't you, my darling? It is a mess, she replied. Lorelei laughed. Different strokes for different folks, darling, isn't that right? Meg raised her eyebrows and rolled her eyes. I just don't know why you have to keep so much stuff. I mean, I understand all this... She gestured at the artwork. But why, for example, do we have nineteen tea towels? Lorelei snorted. We do not have nineteen tea towels. We absolutely do have nineteen tea towels, Mother. I counted them the other day. Just as an experiment. Look!

She leapt to her feet and yanked open a kitchen drawer. She pulled out examples and held them up as evidence. We have tea towels with holes in them, tea towels with burn marks, stained tea towels, threadbare tea towels. But look! We also have brand-new tea towels, look, nice ones. Pandora laughed. I must confess, Lorrie, I bought you that one because I was a bit alarmed by the elderly appearance of the existing tea towels last time I came. Yet, still, Meg continued theatrically, warming to her theme, do we throw the old ones away? No! We do not! We wash them and we dry them and then we fold them and we return them to this drawer which now has nineteen tea towels in it! Well, darling, her mother replied drily, I must say, given that you'll be sitting your O levels in less than three months, I'd have thought you might have better things to do with your time than count tea towels. Please let me throw one away, Mother. Please. I beg of you. How about this one? She held up a limp gray cloth with a rend running down the full length of it. No! exclaimed Lorelei. Absolutely not! It'll do for rags. Mother, said Megan in exasperation, we have a black bag on the landing bulging at the seams with rags. Which we never use. We do not need any more rags. Put it back, said her mother, her joyful eyes clouding over for a moment. Please. Just put it back. I'll do a clear-out another day. When you're all back at school. But you won't, will you? You know that and I know that. If I came back here in ten years time there'd be thirty tea towels in that drawer. Including this one. She hurled the tea towel down on her mother's lap. Oh, now, Megan, come on, said Jenny nervously. Stop bullying lovely Mummy.

Meg sighed and groaned. She looked around and realized that everyone had stopped talking and that they were all staring at her with varying degrees of discomfort. Beth looked at her in an accusatory way from the other table and her father stared at his shoes. Then Meg looked at her mother again, who was smiling nervously and rubbing at the pointy nibs of her elbows. It's only tea towels, said Rhys. Yes, said Lorelei brightly. That's exactly right, Rhys, it's only tea towels. Now, who's for more carrots? Absolutely heaps left!

Megan went up to her room and listened to the Top 40 on Radio One, letting the clean, sweet melody of Simple Minds rub away her frayed nerves. April 2011 It was not a kitchen. Not in any traditional or easily recognizable way. It was a structure, a form, an entity, like the guts of a living creature. It was dark, eerily dark, no sense of the bright spring day outside, just a white stripe of light strafing through a gap in the piles in front of the windows. Meg felt around the wall to her left for the light switch. The lights did not come on.

She was unsurprised. She switched her mobile phone to its torch function and swept the beam around the room. Sweet Jesus Christ. Molly stood behind her mother, a hand clamped over her mouth, her darkly kohled eyes wide with horror. She grabbed Meg's arm with her other hand and gripped it. Megan sighed. Oh, Mum. Molly relaxed her grip on her mother's arm and let her hand drop from her mouth. I remember eating breakfast in here, she said. There was a big table. There. With benches. And the cereal was in jars, over there, with cork lids. And there was a view, through the window. Of a tree... They both turned to look at the

place where the windows had been. But it was hard to place them, behind the wall of things. It was disorienting. The house no longer made any sense. Molly turned back to her mother. How are we going to get through to the rest of the house? Meg sighed and swung the torch beam to the area at the back of the room that should, in theory, have contained a door leading to the hallway and the rest of the house. All that the beam picked out was more walls. Walls within walls. There was no sign of the back of the room and no immediate sense of how to locate it. But then the light picked up a gap, a foot wide. She shone the light down onto the floor and saw flagstones. The flagstones of her childhood. The only familiar feature so far. I think, she said, shining the light back onto the tiny gap, well have to go this way. Youre kidding me, said Molly. Im afraid not. Ill have a panic attack if I have to go through there. Yes. Me too. Although, Christ, Im not even sure I could squeeze through. I mean, look, its so narrow. Well, Im not going there on my own. No way. Meg set her shoulders. Shed lost three stone six years ago she was no longer a size sixteen but still, she was a solid woman, not a waif like her mother and her teenage daughter. Fine, she said, sucking in her stomach, fine. Ill lead the way. Oh, Jesus, whimpered Molly, holding on to the back of Megs T-shirt. Mum, Im scared. Dont be daft, said Meg, holding back her own primeval monsters. Theres nothing to be scared of. Its just Grandmas house. Thats all. But were the first people to set foot in here for years. I mean, shit, Mum, there could be anything in here. Rats! Mum, what about rats?! Its going to be fine, love. There wont be any rats. Grandma didnt really eat at home, so there was nothing for them to dine on. Come on. Just hold on to me and breathe in. The walls compressed Meg firmly from both sides. They felt solid and uniform against her body, but the light from her phone picked out details: a shirt cuff, a shred of netting, the corner of a book, the knot in the top of a black bag. All smoothed to a formless corridor by the passage of Loreleis body over the countless days shed lived here alone, refusing to accept visitors or help. You okay, love? she whispered into the muffled darkness. Yes. I think so. Are we nearly there yet? Meg could feel her heart contracting and throbbing with a deep-seated sense of unease. Pretty much, she replied cheerfully. Whats at the other end? Not sure yet. Hoping for a door. The corridor turned through a forty-five-degree angle a moment later. She aimed the light ahead and saw an opening. Were there, she said. Weve made it. She expected a cool rush of light and freedom as she pulled her body from the claustrophobic crush of her mothers corridor; she expected to be able to shake out her bones and feel released. But she saw immediately that this corridor led directly into another one. The doorway from the back of the kitchen into the front hall was merely a pit stop. She suddenly saw the rest of this journey unfurl in her minds eye. She saw herself squeezing through smaller and smaller apertures, into deeper and deeper corners of the house until she was squashed into a ball and unable to turn around. She swallowed back an urge to scream and said, Right, well, at least its not quite so dark in here. The window on the landing was only partially blocked, allowing a wash of dusty-blue light across the tops of the towers. At least here Meg could gain height and perspective. Ahead of her was the door into the snug, to the left the door into the living room and to the right the foot of the staircase. She only knew this from memory, because no such things were visible from where she stood. Shed been told that Lorelei had lived mainly in her bedroom, so she decided that they should aim to get there, that it was probably less cluttered (Ha! Cluttered! What an entirely insufficient word that is) than the rest of the house and that they were both less likely to die getting into it. Right, she said, encouraging her daughter. Next one! Are you ready? Molly nodded uncertainly and grabbed the back of Megs T-shirt again. They slithered sideways through the tunnel, which, almost like a well-planned road system, had a junction halfway down where they turned right. Meg felt for the first runner with her toes and then gingerly walked up, subconsciously numbering them as shed done countless times as a child. Eleven to the landing. Then a dogleg and another eight to the first floor. As she emerged at the top of the stairs she turned to Molly and smiled. Its quite bright up here, she said. Look, the top of the landing window. You can see out into the garden. Molly stood at her side and they drank in the view from the window as if it were water in a desert. Dust motes sparkled in the midday sun like clouds of glitter. Furry cobwebs hung from the wooden beams in the ceiling and from the old paper light shades. It smelled mustier up here, meatier. Downstairs had carried a smell of dead paper and dust; here it smelled of old flesh and unwashed things. Molly put her hand to her mouth again and shuddered. Gross, she said. Its just as well you cant actually smell these places on TV. No one would watch those shows otherwise. Seriously. Its not as bad as I thought it would be. Given how long she lived like this. Its disgusting. Meg shrugged. She couldnt argue. This is like hell. Its worse than hell. Its hell on actual earth. There were no words. No language sufficient to convey this experience. For years Meg had lain in bed awake at night, imagining this, picturing it, hearing about it secondhand from social workers and the council: This could be the most extreme case of hoarding we have ever encountered. Her life is at

risk, every moment of every day; listening to her mother on the phone playing it down: Oh, its all such a fuss. Such a fuss about a few things. Im all alone now. I can live how I choose. Meg would try to argue: Youll kill yourself. Itll bury you. Theyll have to pull the house down to get your body out. And Lorelei would laugh lightly and say, Thats fine with me. But none of her imaginings had brought her to this place, to the meaty stench and the Gothic horror of it. A low corridor of objects brought them into Loreleis bedroom. Meg remembered vividly the last time shed been in her mothers bedroom. Six years ago. The last time shed come for Easter. Shed arrived with Molly and the boys and found the house already halfway to the state it was in today. Her mother had been sitting in the middle of this room, hillocks of junk piled up around her, like a spider in the middle of its web, painting her toenails periwinkle and smiling at Meg as though all in the world was as it should be. The memory brought a sudden lump to her throat. She remembered how cross shed felt to see her mother like that, buried up to her elegant neck in her own shit, letting her beautiful home fall into decay, cooking up yet more fodder for the neighbors to get into a sweaty lather about. Shed been so cross that shed almost hated her. But now, as she edged her way into the room, she saw the armchair where her mother had been, a fat, flowery thing padded out with cheap cushions, tables at either side, holding bottles of nail polish, paperbacks, rice cakes, the oversized headphones shed wear to listen to the radio, and instead of filth and junk, all she was aware of was the empty space at the center of it all. Molly crunched uncertainly across a rocky pathway of scattered ephemeraempty packaging, discarded clothing, old newspapersand joined her mother at the center of the room. I remember her sitting there, when we came that time, she said breathlessly. Right there. I was scared of her. Meg turned to her daughter and said, Scared? Really? Yes, said Molly. She just looked so bizarre, sitting there, so thin and scrawny, her eyes were kind of like, wild. She wasnt like anyone Id ever seen before. Poor Mum. Meg sighed again. Dont you remember the hot chocolate, though? Molly glanced at her blankly. She made you all hot chocolate. At bedtime. You were all so excited. Dont you remember? Molly shrugged. No recollection at all, she said. I just remember that. She pointed at the chair. Her. There. Meg felt overwhelmed with sadness. I still dont understand, said Molly. I mean, youre like, just so normal. Youre like the most normal person Ive ever met. And youre such a clean freak and everything. How did you come from this? Meg shook her head. Well, obviously it wasnt always like this. Once upon a time, Moll, this place was actually relatively normal. But your mum? Grandma? Was she ever normal? Meg smiled sadly. Well, she said, thats a good question. And I think, with Mum, it really was all just a matter of degrees. She took two more steps towards the armchair and touched it, with the very furthest tips of her fingers. And then, before her inner clean freak could tell her that shed catch fleas, that shed never get the smell out, that it was filthy dirty and full of germs, she lowered herself right into it, right into her mothers armchair. She let her head fall back against the graying upholstery and she looked up at Molly and she smiled. Tiny, tiny little degrees.

Revue de presseClever, intelligent, and believable on a subject few of us really understand. Lorrie is one of the most vividand complexcharacters I've read in years. Wonderful. (Jojo Moyes, author of *Me Before You*)You'll be desperate to find out what messed this family up so badly. (Sophie Kinsella, author of *Shopaholic to the Stars*)A dramatic look at siblings, parents, and hoarding. (Redbook)...prose so beautiful that it glitters on the page. Lisa Jewell lays down piece after piece of mosaic, revealing the heart of the Bird family, filled in equal measure with love and loss. Unforgettable. (Jo-Ann Mapson, author of *Solomons Oak*, *Finding Casey*, and *Owens Daughter*)Lisa Jewells quixotic Bird family functions like an operatic ensembleeach voice distinct, each singing its heart out, seemingly oblivious to the others. Yet somehow by the end of this engrossing, beautifully crafted novel, their separate stories will draw them back together, reminding us that, however hard we struggle against them, family ties are not easily undone. (Judith Ryan Hendricks, author of *Bread Alone*)This richly rendered family saga is populated with such compelling characters and told in such luscious, insightful prose, that a singular tragedy is made universally relatable. You wont be able to stop thinking about it long after the book is over. (Jessie Sholl, author of *Dirty Secret*)A gorgeous, powerful, affecting tale of a family both ordinary and extraordinary. Lisa Jewell is a wonderful storyteller, and *The House We Grew Up In* grips you from the first page to the last. I'm afraid to say it made me neglect both my children and my husband. The Bird family might be dysfunctional, but I was strangely sorry to leave it. (Anna Maxted, author of *Getting Over It* and *Running In Heels*)Jewell cleverly frames the destruction of the Bird family .an absolute page-turner. (Booklist)