Paper Moon

Marion Husband

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Extract

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Prologue

The robe the man had given her to change into was dark blue silk, printed with storks and Japanese gardens and tiny bridges on which pigtailed men crossed shimmering streams. The silk felt cold and slippery against her bare skin and she shivered as though snakes slithered over her flesh. She raised her hands and lifted her hair free to fall around her shoulders.

From behind the camera the man who had introduced himself only as Jason held up a hand as if to silence her. She hadn't thought to speak – the idea that he thought she might surprised her because she was scared and cold and her teeth were chattering. The camera flashed and Jason lowered his hand. She blushed darkly.

'Well done.' His voice was posh and effeminate, and she remembered what was said about certain types of English men. 'Now,' he said, 'take off the robe.'

There was a café across the road from the studio, the place where Jason had first introduced himself and told her she had good bones for the camera, as though the camera was a beast in need of feeding. The café's tables were covered in oilcloths in red checks and steam hissed from a tea urn on the counter. Bath buns sweated beneath a glass dome smudged with an intricate pattern of fingerprints. Men sat at the other tables, hunched possessively over fried bread and bacon and eggs that ruptured

and spilled yellow yokes over the thick white plates. Nina looked away, remembering she was hungry.

At the counter, her companion pointed at the buns. She heard him laugh and looked up. In the studio he had seemed serious, not given to friendliness; he had barely spoken to her at all, only watched as Jason took photo after photo. Behind the café's counter the woman lifted the glass dome and dropped two buns onto a plate, obviously charmed.

He carried the tray of tea and buns to her table and sat down opposite her. His face was serious again. He took cigarettes from his pocket and offered her the open packet. When she shook her head he frowned.

'You don't smoke?'

'It makes me sick.'

'You get over that.' He went on frowning at her, shaking out the match he used to light his own cigarette. 'If you want to be an actress you should smoke. Smoking gives you something to do with your hands.'

He poured the tea, pushing a cup towards her along with the plate of buns. 'Come on, now, eat up.' He imitated her Irish accent so accurately she blushed, bowing her head to hide it. She heard him laugh and forced herself to meet his eye, intending to give him a fierce gaze. But he was smiling at her and once again she was struck by how beautiful he was, like the colour plate of Gabriel in her Children's Illustrated Bible.

She said, 'He takes your picture, too, doesn't he?'

He nodded. 'And afterwards I come here for sticky buns.'

'To feel normal again.'

He gazed at her. Holding out his hand he said, 'Bobby Harris, pleased to meet you.'

His hand was cold and dry in hers. Letting go, she said, 'Nina Tate.'

'Tell me your real name.'

She looked down, stirred sugar into her tea. At last she said, 'Patricia O'Neil.' She met his gaze, daring him to laugh. He only nodded. Taking one of the buns he bit into it and discreetly licked the sugar crystals from his lips.

'Nina, would you like to go to the pictures after this?'

He was eighteen, only months older than her. He was posh, like Jason, but not like him, because she guessed that the photographer had trained himself to talk as he did, whereas Bobby had been born to it. In the dark warmth of the cinema she studied his profile as the lights from the screen alternatively shadowed and illuminated his face. There was a perfect symmetry to his features; his hair was thick and dark, falling over his forehead so that from time to time he pushed it away from his eyes that were green as a cat's. His nose had been broken – there was a small bump on its bridge where it had mended, and she stared at it, wondering how anyone could have hurt him, until he caught her eye and smiled. She looked away. On the screen Fred Astaire danced his impossible

steps and sang, 'If you're blue and you don't know where to go to, why don't you go where Harlem flits…' Bobby leaned towards her, his mouth close to her ear. Softly and in tune he sang, 'Putting on the Ritz,' and a shiver ran down her spine.

He lived in a room above Jason's studio. They lay on his bed, fully clothed, side by side like effigies on a tomb, his hand closed loosely over hers. An oil lamp cast shadows but left the corners of the room in darkness so that she couldn't see the things he might possess. The bed was big enough to leave a decent space between them – she could sleep without touching him, she could pretend to be innocent, even though he had seen her naked. But that had been an odd kind of nakedness; she hadn't given anything away. Daring herself to look at him she turned her head on the fat, feather pillows. He'd lit a cigarette, releasing tremulous rings of smoke into the dull yellow light. The silence between them made her feel safe and lazy, as though she need never talk again.

As the smoke rings flattened against the ceiling she imagined he could hear her heart beating. She wondered if he guessed she loved him, although she had only realised it a moment ago, recognising what Jason must've seen – that they were the same, a matching pair like the Dresden Shepherd and Shepherdess on Father Mitchell's mantelpiece. It seemed immoral to love someone because they looked like you, and she thought of the orphanage nuns who had told her that only the soul was important, although in their

pictures Christ was always exquisite, even in agony.

He turned on his side and edged closer so that their noses almost touched. He said, 'I'm learning to fly,' and at once she imagined wings sprouting from his narrow shoulders, heavy, immaculate wings, white as doves. He was Gabriel, after all, grounded for a time. She smiled and he touched her mouth with his fingers. 'It's true.'

He was silent again, staring at the ceiling where it seemed the smoke rings had left indelible marks like halos. She believed she would sleep – her limbs felt weighted to the bed. She would dream of smoke and flying. His hand squeezed hers.

He said, 'I'd like to make love to you, but it won't mean anything. I don't want you to love me, or think I might love you. Loyalty is what matters.'

She felt as she had when she'd allowed the Japanese robe to slip from her shoulders, a catch-your-breath mixture of fear and excitement that came from knowing she was as wicked as the nuns said she was. She wasn't disappointed that he disregarded love – she suspected men did, at first. She wondered about loyalty, deciding it was safe. He looked at her. He seemed very young and all at once she felt powerful. She smiled, hiding it with her hand.

'You're shocked,' he said.

She stopped herself smiling and arranged her face into a suitable expression of seriousness.

Lowering her hand from her mouth she said, 'It won't mean anything?'

'Except that I think you're lovely.' He seemed to think the word inadequate because he frowned. 'Beautiful. Is that enough?' He gazed into her face before closing his eyes and pressing his mouth to hers.

She became his girl. He bought her copies of the latest Paris fashions made by refugees in back street tailor shops. He bought her gloves and high-heeled shoes and sweet, sexy hats with polka dot veils or flighty feathers. He taught her how to speak as he did and to smoke; he taught her how to hold her head up and sway her hips when she walked so that men smiled after her and whistled. In Jason's photographs around that time she looked as if she was keeping a secret although Jason guessed she was in love and told her to keep it to herself, that it showed in her eyes and ruined his composition. She guessed that he was jealous, newly sophisticated enough to know that Jason loved Bobby, too.

That summer in Hyde Park they watched workmen dig trenches, cover from the bombs no one could imagine falling. The smell of the cold, disturbed soil reminded her of graveyards and she shuddered, slipping her arm around Bobby's waist and leaning close to him. His blue RAF tunic was rough against her face; she traced her fingers over the wings on his chest and pictured him flying in his comical little plane: Bobby the pilot, her delicate, fine-boned boy. He seemed invented for

the air, for light and space and speed; the drudgery of the trench diggers would break him in two.

He said, 'Jason took his last photograph of me today.' He didn't look at her but went on gazing at the men waist deep in the earth. 'He doesn't know yet. He thinks we'll go on as we were.'

His cap shaded his eyes and he bowed his head to light a cigarette, shielding the match with cupped hands. She wondered how anyone could imagine they could go on as they were when Bobby was so changed. After Jason took his photographs he'd discarded the ordinarily beautiful clothes he'd arrived in for the extraordinary transformation of his uniform. He'd adjusted his cap and straightened his tie in front of Jason's wall of mirrors, mirrors they'd used to check other dressing-up costumes. There was no irony in his pose; he didn't smile to include her in this new, elaborate joke. She'd watched his reflection, seeing at last the way he saw himself: serious, intent on the future and a war that couldn't come fast enough. Soon he would look at her and not see the same person but someone he'd known ages ago, a shadow from his childhood.

The workmen climbed from their trench. Clay clung to their boots and smeared their faces where they had wiped sweat from their brows. They looked like creatures of the earth, as weighted to it as she was. Only Bobby could escape.

Chapter One

Soho, April 1946

Standing behind his father's wheelchair, Hugh Morgan scanned the crowded room, looking for the blonde he'd noticed earlier. A moment ago she'd been flirting with Henry, his father's editor, whose cheeks had flushed the same shade of red as the girl's dress. She had laughed suddenly, flashing her teeth and reminding him of the shark in Mac the Knife.

Hugh lit a cigarette and blew smoke into air already thick with tobacco fumes. He'd noticed that the girl used a cigarette holder and that her dress clung to the curve of her backside and plunged between her breasts. He imagined he'd seen the dimple of her belly button through the sheer fabric, realising with dismay that he must have been staring. It seemed as though he had forgotten how to look at women.

Hugh had arrived in London that morning. His ship had docked in Portsmouth the day before and he was now, officially, a civilian. The London train had been full of service men and women, all looking like misplaced persons, grey-faced and anxious, as though the prospect of facing those left behind at the start of the war filled them with dread. What would they say to them? The bed's too soft. The line from one of his father's poems had come back to him as the train rattled through the English countryside. Beside him, a RAF

sergeant had fallen asleep, his Brylcremed head almost resting on Hugh's shoulder, his body a heavy, warm weight against his arm. The WREN opposite smiled in sympathy and he'd realised that women in uniform would never again call him sir. He'd felt liberated, dislodging the still sleeping airman to lean across the carriage and light the girl's cigarette. It had been an uncharacteristic move; all at once he'd found himself too shy to strike up the kind of conversation that might have led to an end to his months of celibacy. He'd spoken to the WREN as though he was still her superior officer. Henry would've had a better chance of getting her knickers off.

Hugh sighed, and gave up looking for the girl in the red dress. She had probably left, bored by his father's middle-aged, bookish friends and the awe-struck fans that turned up to his poetry readings. All Hugh's life his father had been famous, or as famous as poets could be. A crippled veteran of the Somme, turned war poet, Mick Morgan had struck a chord with the British public. A Kipling for the modern age, The Times had called him in its latest review, a great populist. Hugh knew that the article would have angered Mick: the last thing his father wanted to be was popular.

The girl in the red dress appeared again. Twisting round in his wheelchair to look at him, Mick said, 'Her name's Nina Tate. She's a model.'

'What's she doing here?'

Without irony his father said, 'She loves my work. She had a dog-eared copy of Dawn Song

she wanted me to sign.' Watching the girl he said, 'You should introduce yourself, Hugh. Tell her I wrote Homecoming for you – you'll be irresistible.'

'I'd say I'm not her type.'

'How do you know that? For God's sake, boy, if I were your age…'

'Weren't you married when you were my age?' Hugh frowned at him, pretending he didn't know. 'Anyway, why don't you go and talk to her? As the writer of Homecoming you've got a head start on me.'

'I've already invited her to dinner. You can come too, if you like.'

They watched the girl together. A blonde ringlet had escaped from her chignon, bobbing against her long, white neck, and she tucked it behind her ear. Her fingernails were painted scarlet. Hugh imagined their scrape across his back, feeling the stirring of desires too long suppressed.

A week earlier, a few days before Bobby left London, Nina had told him she was going to the book launch. He'd laughed shortly. 'What's he writing about now? Don't tell me – the pity of war, again. More books should be burnt – I was with Adolf on that one.'

Bobby was walking her home from her job as sales assistant in Antoinette Modes. She knew he had spent the day alone in her room and that boredom had soured his mood. Only a week since his release from hospital, he still waited for the

cover of darkness before braving the streets. She'd sighed, searching out his hand from his pocket and holding it gently, as though the burns that disfigured it were still raw and painful. After only a few steps he stopped and lit a cigarette, an excuse to draw his hand away. The match flared, illuminating the taut, immobile mask skin grafts had made of his face, and he held her gaze, his eyes challenging her to look away. He would often test her like this, always alert for expressions that might betray her.

He shook the match out, tossing it into the overgrown garden of a bombed house. Bitterly he said, 'Do you have to go?'

'Not if you don't want me to.'

He sighed. 'Go, buy a pile of his books – we'll have a bonfire.'

She'd laughed despite herself and he'd smiled, reaching out to touch her face before drawing his hand away quickly. 'Be careful of Michael Morgan, he's a womaniser.'

Sitting opposite Morgan now in an Italian restaurant, Nina began to eat the spaghetti the waiter had set in front of her. The pasta was over-cooked, the sauce too thin, sweet with the taste of English ketchup. The bread grew staler in its raffia basket as the poet, his son and his minder ate their meals without comment. They were all used to worse, and the taste could be washed away with the sour red wine, but suddenly she was tired of terrible food and she pushed her plate away and fished in her bag for her cigarettes. Mick Morgan leaned across the table with his lighter.

'Would you like something else?' he asked.

Henry Vickers said, 'They used to do v...v...very g...g...good ice cream here, before the w...w...war.'

Sitting beside her, Morgan's son pushed his own, cleared, plate away. 'You bought me here as a child, do you remember, Henry? Chocolate ice cream in a tall glass and two long spoons. I believed you when you said they wouldn't serve grown-ups ice cream.'

'I didn't think I was such a g...g...good liar.' He smiled at him lovingly. 'I thought you were humouring me.'

'No.' Hugh caught Nina's eye and laughed as though embarrassed.

Nina got up. Smiling at Henry to lessen his discomfort she said, 'Would you excuse me? I have to powder my nose.'

In the ladies' toilets, the sole concession to a powder room was the cracked mirror above the sink. Taking a lipstick from her bag she unscrewed it, then paused. There was no need to put on more – it was simply an automatic response to a mirror, but it helped, sometimes, to look harder than she actually was. She applied it quickly, pressing her lips together to even out the stain. Her reflection smiled back at her, glossy and seductive. Turning away she went back into the dim, red light of the restaurant.

'She's lovely, isn't she?'

Hugh sighed. 'Dad, just stop. I'm tired, I could sleep for a month – I'm not interested in her.'

'Then why come with us tonight? Henry can manage quite well on his own.'

Hugh looked at Henry's empty chair. 'I hurt him, didn't I? I didn't mean to. I suppose I'm out of practice when it comes to dealing with men like him.'

'Oh? I thought the navy was stuffed with queers. I would've thought you'd get plenty of practice.' More harshly he added, 'Anyway, Henry loves you like a father. Maybe if he had been your father you wouldn't be so bloody...' He seemed lost for words and Hugh looked at him.

Levelly he said, 'You haven't asked me how Mum is.'

'How is she?'

'Fine.'

Wanting a drink, Hugh turned towards the bar. The same bunches of dusty wax grapes and vine leaves hung from the walls, looking less exotic now than when he was a child and ice cream was on the menu. They sat on the same plush-covered banquettes he remembered itching against his short-trousered legs and the same posters of Pisa and Rome curled their corners from the walls as red candles cascaded wax down the sides of wine bottles. Only one thing had changed – the man who had been proprietor then, who had pinched his cheek and smiled his rapid, incomprehensible endearments, had been interned on the Isle of Man. He'd died there, so Henry told him. Hugh

sighed, trying unsuccessfully to feel anything but exhausted.

Failing to catch the waiter's eye he turned to his father. 'Do you want a Scotch?'

'No, I've had enough.'

As Henry came back Hugh said too heartily, 'You'll join me, Henry, won't you?'

'Will I? In what?' Henry and Mick exchanged a wry look. Irritated, Hugh turned away.

Nina Tate sat down beside him. She touched his arm briefly and at once turned her attention on his father. 'Would you mind if your son and I go dancing?'

Hugh laughed, astonished. 'Shouldn't you ask me first?'

He felt her foot brush against his ankle; she had taken her shoe off and her silk-stockinged toes worked their way beneath his trouser leg. To Mick she said, 'Thank you for this evening.'

On the street outside the restaurant Hugh said, 'I'm not a very good dancer.'

The girl linked her arm through his. 'Come on,' she said. 'I'll teach you how to jive.'

On the Empire's dance floor, Nina rested her head against Hugh Morgan's shoulder. The lights had been dimmed for the last, slow dance, the spinning glitter ball casting its shards of light at the dancers' feet. From the stage the singer crooned, 'I'll be seeing you, in all those old familiar places…' Nina closed her eyes, remembering that this was one of Bobby's favourite songs, that one

September evening in 1940 she'd noticed him leave a dance as the band began on its opening bars. Outside a bright, full moon hung low in a troubled sky, and she'd watched him gaze at the racing clouds as the music played on without them. Years later he told her that fear would charge at him out of the blue, a huge monster of a feeling that left him feeling flattened and useless. That night he'd turned to her and smiled, his eyes dark with exhaustion. 'Sad songs,' he said. 'Shouldn't be allowed.'

In the Empire the singer drew breath for the last verse. Soon the lights would come up and she would be revealed, smudged and dishevelled in the merciless brightness designed to discourage lingering. She couldn't allow Hugh Morgan to see her like that and so she stepped away from him, smiling fleetingly at his questioning face. Opening her bag she took out the cloakroom ticket and held it up in explanation. 'Shall we avoid the queue?'

'May I see you home?'

As the hat-girl handed them their coats, Nina glanced at Hugh. Thinking about Bobby had made her feel as vulnerable as he was – as though she wasn't wearing knickers and everyone could see through the flimsy fabric of her dress. She put her coat on quickly, bowing her head to fasten its buttons. When she looked up again he was watching her, a good-looking, wholesome man, certain of sex. In the dance hall, she'd noticed other women casting sly glances over the shoulders of less glamorous men, their eyes lingering on his face. Nina could tell what they

were thinking from their smiles: Too handsome. Such good looks were almost preposterous.

She turned up her astrakhan collar. 'It's only a short walk,' she said. 'Not far.'

Hugh Morgan was tall as well as handsome, broad and muscular as a navvy, his skin tanned. She'd always imagined sailors as small and lithe. She supposed she'd seen too many films in which agile boys climbed the rigging of sailing ships, quick as monkeys. But the navy didn't have sails any more, just the industrial metal of battleships. In the newsreels the ships were vast and slow and looked invincible. Lieutenant Hugh Morgan would be at home on such a deck.

In her bed he slept on his back, a sheet gathered at his groin. On his left arm, close to his shoulder, a Chinese dragon roared fire, its eyes bulging malice, its tail twisting to a devil's point. He'd smiled as she'd traced her finger over it. 'I was drunk. I wanted an anchor.'

'Too dull.' She drew her hand away, sitting back on her heels.

He'd reached up to cup her face in his palm. After a moment he asked, 'Why did you come to Dad's party?'

'I wanted to meet him. Ever since I first read his poetry – '

He laughed, shutting her up. Fumbling on the bedside table for his cigarettes he'd glanced at her. 'Have you read the new book?'

'Of course.'

'I haven't. Not a single line.'

Still sleeping on his back he snored, a noise that broke into garbled speech. She sat up, taking care not to wake him, and shrugged on the silk robe with its pattern of Japanese gardens. In the corner of her bed-sit she set the kettle on the single gas ring and stood over it, ready to turn off the heat as soon as its whistle sounded. Above the sink her window looked out over the huddled rooftops of slums, the crooked line broken where bombs had dropped. She could see the dome of St Paul's in the near distance, so unaffected by the surrounding destruction that there was talk of divine intervention. Such talk made her feel weary. She rubbed at a sticky spot on the glass; a few days ago she'd removed the strips of tape a previous tenant had criss-crossed over the pane, the process a chore rather than the ritualistic celebration of the war's end she'd imagined it would be. In the end, there had seemed nothing to celebrate.

For the whole of VE Day she had stayed in her room. Below her window crowds sang and cheered and she imagined strangers embracing on the street. Later a fight had broken out, American voices cursing like film gangsters, a lone police whistle sounding frantic, foolishly impotent. There was a noise like a gunshot, a car backfiring or a firework kept safe for the duration, exploding for the victors. All the same, in the morning she'd expected to see a body sprawled on the pavement, blood thick as tar in the gutter. She'd kept the blackout curtain closed tight, keeping the revelry at bay, and thought about Bobby enduring yet

another operation on his hands. She hoped that the streets around the hospital were quiet, that someone would explain to him when he woke from the anaesthetic what all the fuss was about. After an operation he was confused and anxious and she'd wished desperately to be at his bedside, at the same time guiltily relieved that she wasn't.

The kettle whistled shrilly and the stranger in her bed garbled a command from his sleep. Turning off the gas she stayed very still, watching to make sure he slept on. At last, reassured, she made weak, black tea, sweetening it with the last of her sugar ration before taking Dawn Song from her bag. Curling up in the room's only armchair she began to read.