The Boy I Love

Marion Husband

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Extract

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Chapter One

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Hiding in Adam's pantry, Paul remembered how he was once forced to eat marmalade at school, a whole pot of marmalade, Jenkins twisting his arms up his back as Nichols held his nose and clattered the spoon past his teeth. He stared at the jar on Adam's shelf. Its contents were all but finished; only a dark orange residue speckled with toast crumbs and marbled with butter remained. He unscrewed the lid, wondering if marmalade could taste as bad as he remembered. The scent of bitter oranges assaulted him as outside the pantry door his father's voice rose a little, as close to anger as he ever came.

'He's not well enough to be out on his own.'

'Doctor Harris, I swear I didn't even know he was home.'

'He writes to you.'

'He wrote occasionally.'

Paul placed the marmalade back on the shelf, listening more carefully. That pinch of truth would help the lie down – that "occasionally" held the right note of disappointment. His father might almost believe his letters to Adam were infrequent.

George sighed. 'If you do see him…'

'I'll bring him straight home.'

Paul listened as Adam showed George out, waiting until he felt sure his father had gone before pushing the pantry door open. In a stage whisper he asked, ‘All clear?’

Adam sat down at the kitchen table. Taking off his glasses he ground the heels of his hands into his eyes.

‘Jesus, Paul. He knew you were in the pantry. He bloody knew.’ He looked up. ‘He didn’t speak to me. He spoke to the bloody pantry door.’

Sitting opposite him Paul reached across the table and took his hand. ‘At least you didn’t give us away.’

Adam drew his hand back. ‘He could smell your cigarette smoke.’

‘Maybe he thought you’d taken up smoking. Maybe you should.’ Paul shoved his cigarette case towards him. ‘Calm your nerves.’

‘You know I hate it.’

Lighting up, Paul blew smoke down his nose. ‘Hate what? Lying, smoking or having a one-eyed lunatic hiding in your cupboards?’

‘Smoking.’ Adam sighed. ‘No point hating the rest of it, is there?’

Adam polished his glasses on the corner of his shirt. Hooking the wire frames over his ears he smiled at Paul. ‘Cup of tea?’

‘I should go. He’s had enough worry, lately.’

‘Haven’t we all.’

‘I’d better go.’

‘Yes. Of course. Better go.’

Neither moved. Paul’s bare toes curled against the cold lino. The kitchen of Adam’s terrace house was always cold, always smelt of yesterday’s frying, always made him want to take boiling, soapy water and a scrubbing brush to the sink and stove and floor. He thought of the stale-biscuit smell in the pantry, the

damp in the corners, the nagging suggestion of mice. He shuddered and wiped imaginary marmalade stickiness from his fingers.

That morning he had turned up on Adam's doorstep, leaving his father to his breakfast, using up another lie about needing fresh air. He had seen Adam only yesterday, his first day home, and all he could think about was seeing him again, of lying down in his bed and breathing in the fug of sweat and come and cigarettes as he slept. Adam would work downstairs, marking his piles of ink-smudged essays. Later he would slip under the covers beside him, warming himself against his body. As the room darkened they would make love whilst in the street children called to one another and dogs barked and church bells closed the day. There would be none of yesterday's fast, furious fucking, the sex that came from relief and awkwardness and lust. Adam would make love to him and he would be loose-limbed and lazy. Afterwards he would sleep again. He would sleep all night in Adam's bed, Adam's legs entwined with his, Adam's breath warm on his face. He had wanted this day and night for years.

Adam, however, had wanted to feed him – eggs and bacon and thick slices of bread, cups of sweet tea, a rice pudding he'd made especially for him. He was an invalid to be fattened; he was too thin by far, a bag of neglected bones. Quick with embarrassment Adam had fussed between sink and stove and table. Later they had fucked routinely and Paul had left his eye patch on although he had planned to take it off. Taking off the patch would have been a kind of unveiling. Such theatrics had seemed inappropriate after the ordinariness of rice pudding.

Paul stubbed his cigarette out, crushing it into a saucer so that it all but disintegrated and Adam ducked his head to smile into his face.

'Paul? You've gone silent again.'

'I'm fine.' He smiled back. Like George, Adam needed constant reassurance. 'I've left my shoes and socks upstairs.'

Adam laughed. 'You know, I half expected to see you in uniform. I almost didn't recognise you, standing there in civilian clothes.'

'Disappointed?'

'No, of course not.'

'You said once I suited the uniform.'

'Did I? You suited the cap, I think.'

'I'll keep it. Wear it in bed.'

'I'm glad you're back.' Adam laughed again. 'Glad. Christ, what kind of word is that, eh? Glad. Bloody glad.'

'I'm glad to be back.' Paul stood up. 'I'll go and get my shoes.'

As he went past Adam caught his hand. 'I love you.'

'I know. I love you too.'

Paul took a shortcut home through the park that separated Thorp's long rows of back-to-back terraces, its steel works and factories from the small, middle-class ghetto of Victorian gothic villas where his father lived. He sat down on the graveyard wall opposite his house and lit a cigarette, imagining his father in the kitchen toasting cheese, his usual supper. Cheese on toast then cake made by a grateful patient, then tea, strong, just a little milk, no sugar. George was a man of habit. Paul looked at his watch; it was later than he'd thought – the tea would be drunk, the cup and saucer and plate washed and dried and put away. His

father would be reading the *Telegraph* in front of the kitchen fire. In France, and later during his months in St Steven's, he had remembered his father's rituals and almost wept with homesickness. Now, as the cold from the wall seeped into his bones, he wanted to walk away from the smallness of them, back to one of the pubs he had passed along the back streets. At the Stag's Head or the Crown & Anchor he would order beer and share a joke with the hard men of Thorp. Paul smiled to himself. He would get his head beaten in along a dark alley, called a fucking little queer as boots smashed his ribs. He had only to look at one of them in the wrong way. Best if the fucking little queer went home and faced his father's disappointment. Tossing the half-smoked cigarette down he crossed the road towards the unlit windows and locked door of his father's house.

Margot said, 'He's home.'

'Who, dear?' Her mother looked up from her knitting, rows of grey stitches that were beginning to take the shape of a mitten. Mitten production hadn't stopped just because the war had. There were orphans' hands to keep warm now. Absently she repeated, 'Who's home?'

'Robbie's brother. Paul.'

'Oh?' Iris Whittaker laid the knitting down on her lap. 'That poor boy. He was so handsome, wasn't he? I remember how handsome he looked at your birthday party. Such a beautiful face. It must be quite dreadful for him.'

'It would be dreadful for any one. Even an ugly man.'

'Yes, of course, but worse, somehow, for such a good-looking boy. Such a courteous boy, too. So charming. Poor George. I thank God every night you

were born a girl. If we'd had boys like poor Doctor Harris…'

They would be dead, Margot thought, and considered saying it aloud. Dead as dodos. Dead as doornails. Stone, cold, dead. No one said the word dead in this house, although whichever of the vicarage windows you looked from you could see the weeping angels and floral tributes that marked out dead territory. Dead was such a stark word when death was so close, so her father, when he'd told her of Robbie's death, had cleared his throat and said, 'That boy's been taken from us.'

She knew, of course, exactly who and what he meant. That boy: Robbie. Dead.

Her mother picked up her knitting. 'He'll have a glass eye, of course. It might look real, from a distance.'

'Look but not see,' Margot said quietly.

'Pardon, dear?'

'Didn't you think he was horribly vain?'

'Vain?' The wool was held taught and crossed over the needles. 'All men are vain, dear. At least he had the right to be.'

Margot closed her eyes. Robbie had said, 'It's amazing that Paul and I have leave together.' He'd grinned. 'I can show you off to him – introduce you as my fiancée.'

'I thought we weren't going to tell anyone.'

'We can tell Paul. He's so self-centred he'll have forgotten by tomorrow.'

Margot remembered how Robbie had pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly so that her cheek felt the scratchiness of his uniform. Khaki smelt of dry hessian, of sweat and metal polish that she imagined was the stink of gunpowder. Beneath the khaki his

body felt hard and spare. She tried to remember how she had responded, if she had drawn away a little or pressed herself closer. She remembered he groaned. Perhaps she had encouraged him.

'I think I'll go to bed.' Margot closed the book she'd been pretending to read and stood up.

Iris glanced at her. 'Say goodnight to your father.' The knitting needles picked up speed. 'Tell him if that sermon isn't finished by now it's too long.'

In her father's study a picture of Jesus surrounded by children hung above the fireplace. Christ was white and pale gold, the children dark and dressed in bright colours. A lamb knelt at Jesus's side, a garland of flowers around its neck. The picture was titled *Suffer the Little Children.* Robbie had frowned at it. 'I was in Palestine before the war. The children wore rags.' She tried to remember the tone of his voice. Not quite so pompous, maybe, just matter-of-fact.

Her father looked up from his desk. 'Margot. Off to bed?'

She sat down opposite him on one of the chairs arranged for those about to inform him of marriages, births and the passing-on of loved ones. Placing his pen down the Reverend Daniel Whittaker smiled at her.

'Sermon on the Mount. For the memorial service tomorrow.'

'Oh.'

'Blessed are the peace-makers.'

'Yes.'

'It's so important to strike the right note. So difficult.' He sighed. 'I've asked Mr Baker to read the lesson.'

Mr Baker: three lost sons. Margot nodded. 'That's good.'

‘I hope it won’t be too much for him.’

‘Daddy…?’ she began. More quietly she went on, ‘I’m going to have a baby.’

‘Sorry, dear?’ Looking up from the sermon he frowned. ‘You do look peaky, my dearest heart.’ He sighed again. ‘You should go to bed. Up the wooden hill.’ He smiled. ‘Remember how I used to say that when you were small?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes.’ After a moment he said, ‘Go to bed, Margot. Try not to worry.’

As she was about to close the door behind her he called out, ‘Say your prayers, Margot. God always listens.’

On the stairs she looked back towards the study door. She had deliberately left it ajar so she might spy on him from the wooden hill. He was lighting his pipe, packing the tobacco down with his thumb as he sucked on the stem to draw the flame. She knew he knew. For now it was their secret, stored against her mother.

Her mother had no idea how wicked she was. Although Robbie had said I love you only once, she hadn't stopped him when he slipped his hand under her camisole. She had lost her voice; the shock of his cool, hard palm against her breast seemed to cleave her tongue to the roof of her mouth. He had drawn away, smiling at her hands clenched into fists at her sides. ‘You’re not going to box my ears, are you?’

‘No!’ She remembered blushing.

Robbie laughed a little, his eyes avoiding hers. ‘I wish you were older, sometimes.’

Her blush deepened and she dug her fingernails into her palms, a counterpoint to the pain of humiliation. ‘I’m old enough!’

‘Then try and behave as though you are!’ Vehemently he said, ‘Don’t look at me as though you want to eat me alive, then turn stiff as a corpse the minute I touch you.’

Later he was penitent, his head bowed as he held her hands. She'd been afraid that he might cry. A little later still and he was pushing her down into the long grass beside the Makepeace tomb, covering her face with frantic kisses as his hand scrambled beneath her petticoats. When he had pressed his hand between her legs she hadn't protested. ‘Let me,’ he whispered, and she’d nodded, not knowing how to refuse him: the war had made him strange, an infectious strangeness, she realised now.

She splayed her fingers over her belly. She would show soon and even her mother would notice. Then there would be tears. All the listening Gods in the world wouldn’t help her then. She thought of nunneries; a nunnery would be her mother’s solution. Nuns with hard hands and stern voices would take charge and smooth it over and send her home a sinner still, but a sinner whose sin was taken away, a Mad Hatter’s riddle. She wouldn’t think about it anymore. Turning away she climbed the stairs to bed.

Paul had vomited twice that morning. Once just after his father told him they were going to church and again as they were about to leave, when he told him that it was to be a special service of remembrance and they were expected for lunch at the vicarage afterwards. That second time had exasperated George.

Placing his hand firmly on his son’s forehead he barked, ‘Any stomach pain?’

Paul twisted away. ‘No.’

‘Bowels moving normally?’

‘Dad! For Christ’s sake.’

George ushered him out. Locking the front door behind him he said, ‘You smoke too much. It’s enough to make anyone sick.’

Across the road St Anne’s Church loomed from the leafless trees. Sunday-best parishioners snailed their way towards the church doors. Paul began to worry that he would be expected to talk to these people, that they would tell him about lost sons and husbands and brothers as though they expected some kind of comfort from him because he survived. He felt the bile rise in his throat again and he closed his eye.

‘Paul.’ George’s voice was sharp. ‘Pull yourself together. Remember what your doctors said.’

‘They said, “Lieutenant Harris, we’ve dug out your left eye with a rusty spoon. Any questions?”’

‘Don’t be idiotic. And I wish you wouldn’t hide your glass eye behind that patch. You look like a pantomime pirate.’

They crossed the road. George took his elbow and steered him like a very old man along the graveyard path, past the angel weeping over his mother’s grave, past the urns and obelisks of those who had died comfortable deaths. Frosted leaves crunched beneath his thin-soled shoes and the cold kept his hands deep inside his trench coat pockets, making him a sloppy civilian from cap-less head to ill-shod foot. In some hospital or another he’d lost the leather gloves Rob had given him. He thought about the gloves, concentrated on remembering their beautiful stitching, the way they kept the shape of his hands when he took them off, the expensive, masculine smell of them. He thought about the gloves as George led him up the aisle and gently pushed him down on to a pew. Only when his father pressed a handkerchief into his hand did he realise

he'd been weeping over their loss. From the pew in front a child turned to stare at him and was slapped on the legs for her rudeness.

'Have you met Reverend Whittaker, Paul?' Standing in front of the vicarage fireplace George was forcing himself to smile.

Paul nodded. 'We met during my last leave, at Margot's party.' He held out his hand. 'How are you, sir?'

Daniel Whittaker shook his hand briefly. 'Would you like a drink before lunch? Whisky or sherry?'

'Oh, whisky, I think.' George seemed to relax a little. 'Lunch smells good.'

Whittaker turned towards an elaborately carved sideboard crouching against the dining room wall. 'My wife's cooking beef.'

Handed his own short measure of Scotch Paul said, 'Do you mind if I smoke, sir?'

'I presume you smoke cigarettes?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then would you mind if I asked you to smoke them in the garden?'

George said, 'It's a disgusting habit, dirty and disgusting.'

'I smoke a pipe myself.'

To hide his smile Paul bowed slightly. 'Would you excuse me?'

'Don't be long, Paul. I don't want you catching cold.'

To avoid catching cold Paul walked back to the hallway where Whittaker had hung his coat. He put it on, turning up the collar and buttoning it, trying not to

think of those wretched gloves that once lived in the pockets.

As he fastened the belt a voice behind him asked, 'Are you leaving?'

Paul turned round, his fingers going to check that the eye-patch hid all it was supposed to.

The vicar's daughter smiled at him, her own hand going to the blush that was spreading over her throat.

'Hello, Margot.'

She was standing on the stairs, so much higher than him he had to tilt his head back to look at her. Touching her left eye she said hesitantly, 'The patch…It makes you look dashing.'

He laughed.

'No. Really. It suits you…' Her blush deepened. 'Sorry, I didn't mean that, exactly. It must have been horrible.' She came down. 'Are you leaving?'

'Leaving? Oh, no. No, not leaving. I wanted a cigarette.'

'Daddy wouldn't let you smoke in the house?'

'No.'

'I smoke.'

'Really? Well, if you'd like one of mine…'

'Yes, thank you.'

She had thought he was Robbie, returned from the grave, wearing the same coat she imagined they buried him in, the same coat he had spread on the grass behind the Makepeace tomb. He had lost his captain's cap, and those strips of cloth like khaki bandages he wrapped around his shins, but it was Robbie, not dead, only lost. She'd stood on the stairs watching him, holding her breath to be as silent as possible until slowly she realised that this was only Paul, the boy who had looked so close to weeping as her father

spoke of the importance of remembering, everyone had seemed embarrassed for him. Afterwards, when he was in the queue to shake her father's hand, most people had kept their distance, as though madness was contagious.

In the garden Margot watched as he fumbled with a cigarette case and matches. His hands shook and he smiled apologetically as first one match and then another broke.

'Let me,' she said, and took the matches from him.

He stepped closer, accepting the light she held out. Just like Robbie, he blew smoke down his nose and smiled at her. 'When did girls start smoking?'

'Same time as boys.'

'1914?'

She felt her face flush. 'Probably.'

They stood side by side, smoking in silence. From the corner of her eye she noticed his fingers go again and again to the eye-patch as though checking its straightness. Tossing her finished cigarette down she pulverised it into the crazy-paved path.

'I have to help my mother serve lunch.'

'Margot…' He caught her arm as she turned away, immediately releasing her as she faced him. 'I'm sorry about Rob.'

'I should say that to you, shouldn't I?'

'I know how close you and he were.'

'What do you know? What did he say about me?'

'That you were going to be married.'

'Yes! We were!' She laughed harshly. 'He promised me. We would have been married by now.' She began to cry and he took a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. 'I'm sorry.' Dabbing at her eyes she said, 'I don't know what came over me.'

'Misery? That's what comes over me, anyway.'

She gave back the handkerchief. ‘Thank you for the cigarette.’

As she walked away she had a feeling he was watching her. When she looked back she saw that he had turned away and was staring out towards the graves.