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Opening Extract from...

A Place Called Winter

Written by Patrick Gale

Published by Tinder Press

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A PLACE CALLED WINTER

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First published in Great Britain in 2015
by TINDER PRESS
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 0529 2 (Hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4722 0530 8 (Trade Paperback)

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.tinderpress.co.uk
www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Chapter One

The attendants came for him as a pair, as always. Some of them were kind and meant well. Some were frightened and, like first timers at a steer-branding, hid their fear in swearing and brutality. But this pair was of the most unsettling kind, the sort that ignored him. They were talking to one another as they came for him and continued to talk to one another as they fastened the muff on his wrists and led him along the corridor to the treatment room.

He was the first in that day, so the echoing room, where even ordinary speech was magnified to a shout, was quiet except for the sound of filling baths. There were eight baths in a row, only three feet apart. From a distance they looked like ordinary baths. Close to, they were revealed as having a kind of hammock slung in the water.

"I don't need the hammock,' he told them, "Or the muff. If you want me to climb into a bath and lie there, I'll do it. I don't need the hammock. Please?"

Ignoring him, the attendants broke off from their mumbled conversation. One unbuttoned Harry's pajama jacket. The other undid the cord on his pajama trousers so that they dropped to the floor.

"This is to calm you," one said, as though reading out an official notice. "You've been excitable and this is to calm you down." He tweaked Harry's jacket off his shoulders. "In you get."

"I'd much rather have an ordinary bath. Please, not the belts."

In a practised movement, one of them seized his ankles while the other took his shoulders and they tipped him and lowered him into the nearest bath so that he was held in the hot water by

the hammock. The temperature was high but not unpleasant. It was the loss of control that was unpleasant. One attendant held Harry's wrists in place near his waist while the other tugged a thick leather belt across the chest. Then they secured his legs with a second belt. They then tugged up a thick tarpaulin cover, like a sort of tent, to enclose the bath entirely. There was an opening in this which they brought up around his shoulders and secured about his neck with little straps so that as little steam as possible would escape. He was now held, immobile, in the flow of hot water with only his head on view.

"Please," he said. "Don't leave me."

The attendants wandered away, still talking. They passed two more attendants bringing in someone else who was shouting that they were trying to murder him. When the new man was undressed, he pissed on the attendant crouching in front of him and the ensuing fuss gave him the opportunity to run away. There were curses and yells from the corridor and whistles were blown, then came the muffled sounds of someone being kicked and sat upon.

The man's silence, when they brought him back in and secured him in the bath immediately next to Harry's, was worse than any shouting. And when they left him alone in the running water, he twisted his head so as to stare at Harry, which was more disturbing yet. Harry gazed through the clouds of steam at the taps and the sea green tiles, and tried to pretend he wasn't really there.

"I know you," the man said, quietly but insistently. "I know you I know you I—"

He woke with a convulsion and sensed his own shout had roused him. He wasn't in the dormitory. The dormitory had so many bedsteads crammed into it that some, including Harry's, were in the middle of the room. The bedstead here was iron and painted

white, but there the resemblance ended. He was in a small, wood-lined room, painted a calm, sky blue and with thick, white curtains across the little window. It was simply furnished. There was a rag rug beside the bed and a bedside table with a lamp and matches on it. His boots were on the floor and his coat on a hook above them. A suit that wasn't his hung on a hanger on the next peg along. On a plain, wooden chair was a neat stack of underwear, shirts and socks he knew were not his either.

Wide awake now, he found water on the washstand in a jug and washed. He stared at his face in the little spotted mirror hanging there. A gaunt stranger stared back at him. He did not remember growing a beard but, of course, where he had come from, there were no razors and no looking glasses either: nothing to wound or inflame.

Dressing in the spotlessly clean clothes, which fitted him so well he might have been measured for them as he slept, he made an effort to be calm. *Breathe*, he told himself. *Remember to breathe*. And he remembered another man's voice telling him that very thing and had to sit abruptly on the little bed to compose himself, so acute and ambivalent was the memory stirred.

Venturing out into dazzling morning light, he would have thought he had woken in a kind of heaven, were it not for the lingering sense that Hell was flickering just out of sight, whichever way he turned his gaze. He knew he had been in Hell. He had livid marks on his wrists and ankles where restraints had cut and bruised his flesh and, when he moved his back, it still ached from blows and kicks that had rained upon it.

Earlier than that, before Hell, his memories were more damaged still. These memories lay in rooms he couldn't enter. In the quiet moments of lucidity between baths, he had approached them close enough to sense they were wrapped in a grief so powerful that even to put his hand on the doorknobs would fry his skin.

He was in a river valley with lush grass, cropped by sheep and a couple of languid cows, running down to a broad, brown river on whose powerful current he had already seen several fallen trees sail past from left to right. Great ranges of blue iced mountains lay to either side, their lower slopes thickly forested. A church bell rang somewhere off to the left. The beauty of it, the intensity of the colours and the relative silence overwhelmed him for a moment and he sat on a little bench to recover.

He was not insane, although he felt sure the experience of being treated as though he were would soon have deprived him of his wits had it continued much longer. He looked up, attention snagged by a buzzard's cry. *I know a hawk from a handsaw*, he thought. It was an asylum, not a prison, where he had been, but he had been deprived of liberty and, so far as he knew, without trial.

The attendants had come for him as usual, after breakfast, and he had assumed that the endless, soul-eroding process of pacifying him by water treatments was to continue. He marginally preferred the cold wrap to the continuous bath, if only because it was administered in a smaller room where he had precious peace and quiet, provided he didn't begin to shout out in a panic. If anything, though, it was even more constraining than the bath, involving as it did being tightly wrapped in a sheet dipped in cold water, around which were wound two more sheets, a rubber mat and then a blanket, before he was left secured to a wire bed frame, sometimes for three hours, quietly dripping first with water, then with sweat.

Today, however, he wasn't to have a treatment.

"You're going on a journey," one of them told him. "Young Mr. Ormshaw has picked you to help with his research, so we need you nice and quiet."

They rolled up his sleeve and administered an injection that was clearly a powerful sedative for, by the time they had given him socks to wear and handed him back his old boots and overcoat, he was so foggy in the head that he couldn't have spoken any of the questions that crowded his mind.

His little cabin had a shaded terrace on one side of it. It was one of several such, clearly built from identical kits, arranged in a half circle before a large, log framed house which resembled some fanciful idea of a Tyrolean chalet onto whose veranda he half expected chorus girls to emerge in dirndls, holding hoops of paper flowers and singing of love and springtime.

For it was springtime, which was presumably why the river was so mightily in spate. The greening woods behind him were full of birdsong and, sitting on his terrace, he watched birds, chipmunk and squirrels darting back and forth on the grass, going about the exhausting spring business of putting on fat and finding a mate.

He had no sense of where he was or how far he and the silent attendant with him had travelled. Being expected to board a train had stirred up in him such violent misgivings they had been obliged to administer a second dose of the sedative, so he had slept like a drunkard for much of the journey. The latter part of the voyage, by road, was undertaken in darkness. All he registered as he tumbled into a bed whose linen had been chilled by sharp, mountain air, was relief that his bed was on its own, and that he could hear only his own sighs and breathing, not the shouts and weeping of others.

A gong sounded from the main house. Harry flinched, prepared for the idyll to be broken by orderlies or nurses, but glanced across and saw only a simply uniformed maid standing by an open door. Noticing him, she raised a hand in greeting, tapped the gong a few more times as though for his benefit, then

slipped inside again. The door of the next cabin along opened and there emerged a slender, blonde woman wearing respectable but antique clothes.

"Good morning," she said in a high voice, and he rose to meet her. As she offered him a small, lace-fringed hand, he saw she was considerably older than her figure suggested.

"How do you do," he said.

"Are you going to breakfast?"

"I… I imagine so."

"You must be hungry after your journey," she said. She had one of those little girl voices which so often seemed to mask an aggressive nature. "We heard you arrive but were under strict instructions to leave you in peace. I'm Mabel. We use no surnames or titles here. The good doctor is Quakerish in his leanings." She laughed, skittishly.

"I'm Harry," he told her.

"Delighted. Harry, let me take you to breakfast."

"Is this a hospital?" he began and she laughed again.

"Another forbidden word. You're quite the rebel, I can see! It's a *community*. A therapeutic community. Now, here's Bruno."

A mannish woman in a boxily tailored outfit, a sort of suit, had emerged from a third cabin. She shook Harry's hand and fired off a series of questions about his journey he felt quite unable to answer, not having been aware even of where he had come from. She was gently rebuked by Mabel, which she took in good part, and they proceeded towards the house. Other doors had opened and, all told, some eight of them were now walking that way. Apart from the two ladies he had met, all were men. One of them, a black man Harry assumed was someone's servant, stood back respectfully and, naturally, unacknowledged, until the rest of them had passed.

As they neared it, the door to the cabin closest to the house opened. He glanced back to see a tall Indian woman had emerged,

dressed in quietly elegant western clothes. She ducked her head as he looked back at her, showing off the black hair she wore in a thick cascade. Mabel gave a little cough, drawing his attention back to herself.

There were two rooms at their disposal, both overlooking the river. One was the snug library, into which he merely glanced, the other, the dining room, in which their host bade them all a general good morning before singling Harry out for greeting.

Harry recognized him as one of the doctors who had occasionally questioned him at the asylum - a tall, dark haired young man with a thick moustache which emphasized his sad, moist eyes. Instinctively Harry stiffened.

"It's all right, Harry. You're among friends, now," he said and shook his hand emphatically in both of his. "Did you manage to sleep in the deafening quiet?"

"Yes, thank you, Doctor. Mr. Ormshaw."

"I'm Gideon, here, Harry. Now, let's see…" He glanced at his pocket watch. "At ten o'clock please come to my study."

Breakfast was spread out on the sideboard in a sequence of steaming dishes. "No meat or alcohol, here," Mabel told him in a murmur. "Gideon believes they are destabilizing."

"Thank God for coffee," Bruno added. She noticed Harry was standing, staring. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Do… Do…"

She watched kindly as he stammered. "Take your time," she murmured.

"Do we help ourselves?" he asked at last.

"Yes."

"And… where are the attendants?"

"Bless you, there are no attendants here."

They were informal to the extent of helping themselves and sitting where they chose. To his surprise, the Indian woman and negro had joined them. Unsurprisingly, they ate by themselves at

tables set for one. One of the men was a nervous giggler. Mabel was a person who chatted even when no-one was talking to her. It made him wonder what she was like when there was no company to animate her. Bruno hung on her every word, clearly an abject slave, but was constantly passed over by Mabel, who seemed to regard mere female attention as cheap currency.

With their tidy spring suits and small touches of elegance, a silk handkerchief here, a pocket watch there, the men clustered at one end of a table reminded him of something. It was only watching them roll their napkins at breakfast's end that he realized it was the gentlemen of The Gaiety's chorus. In London. A lifetime ago.

Each resident was assigned a napkin ring of a different design. Harry's had a pattern of ivy leaves. Feeling the heavy, white damask between his fingers, he struggled to remember the last time he had used a napkin.

"A far cry from the snake pit, isn't it?" one of the men said, watching him, and was shushed by Mabel.

"We don't speak of such places here," she said, then turned a kind face on Harry. "Gideon believes in the healing power of civilized touches," she said.

Both black man and Indian had left the room without his noticing. Emerging onto the terrace, after hot breakfast rolls as soft and pale as infancy, he saw the man was at work in the garden already, tidying the path edges with a spade and tossing the trimmings into a barrow. Perhaps Mr. Ormshaw was a socialist as well as a Quaker, to have patients dine with his servants.

A small macaw had been set out on a perch to enjoy the sun. It was discreetly shackled to its post, he saw. It waved its wings in greeting as he emerged, displaying feathers so bright they scorched the eye, before picking a nut from its little bowl and falling to preening. For the second time since waking, Harry was

overwhelmed by the clarity and beauty of it all and felt he might cry.

"Look but don't touch," Bruno said behind him. "Gideon took him on when he bit a girl's finger clean in two. We all have our unspeakable pasts here…" And she made him a kind of salute with her fingertips before striding down the steps and off through the grounds with the air of one taking a constitutional.

There was a piercing whistle from across the valley and he saw the steam from a train making its way through the trees and caught a flash of its paintwork. The sight sent a painful shudder through him which he felt briefly distort his face. A cuckoo clock, surely chosen in irony, was chirping ten in the hall as their host stepped out to find him.

"This way, Harry," he said.

For all the informality, Gideon had not eaten breakfast with them. Perhaps, despite his socialism, he found the maintenance of a certain distance useful? He led the way through the library, where several residents were reading or writing, out into a sort of conservatory and into his consulting room on the far side, which stuck out from one corner of the house so as to command a fine view of the river.

He stood with Harry admiring the swirling waters for a minute.

"The mighty Athabasca," he said.

"Does it ever flood?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes. I lost my dog to it last winter."

"How upsetting."

"There was a hole in the ice and the silly thing was fascinated by the way the water repeatedly splashed out of it and wouldn't stop going over there, so I kept him tied up. But then some kind person let him off and he fell through and drowned before we could cut him out."

"Have you forgiven them yet?"

The doctor smiled. "Not yet," he said. "I forgave the resident right away – she was so upset. Forgiving the river may take a while longer."

They sat on either side of his mahogany desk, on which he had an open file.

"So, Harry. Welcome to Bethel. How was breakfast?"

"Delicious, thank you."

"Good. This isn't an asylum, although everyone here is what my colleagues at Essondale – where you were – would call mentally ill. All of you have displayed behaviour or declared opinions that have had people want you put out of the way.

"I happen to be making some of those behaviours my particular study. I depart from my colleagues in not regarding them as pathological but as intrinsic to a personality type. And I have won the state's trust sufficiently to have been allowed to bring some of you here to help me with my research. You are not under lock and key. You are at liberty to walk in the gardens, to follow the trails in the woods and even to go into Hinton, should you wish. All I ask is that nobody leave the immediate grounds unaccompanied and that you always let me know your whereabouts by signing yourselves out in the register on the hall table.

"I ask that you all respect one another's privacy; we all have stories but I prefer those stories to emerge voluntarily, not through interrogation.

"I ask that you respect one another's differences. You may already have seen, you almost certainly will see, behaviour you might regard as odd or even wrong. But remember that, in the eyes of the attendants at Essondale, or wherever, you are no different from them.

"Here endeth the homily. Do you have any questions, Harry?"

"Only…" Harry began. "It's so different here. Like a private house."

"It is a private house." He smiled. "It's my house."

"Do we pay fees?"

"You are all here as my guests. When you leave, if you choose to send a donation for the furthering of my work, I won't stop you. I inherited a certain amount from my father and it pleases me to spend it this way."

Harry sensed the good doctor and his father had not been in sympathy.

"So. I need to ask you a few things before we start…"

He rattled off a series of questions. What was Harry's name and birthdate, where did he live, who was the king, who was the prime minister, how would he react to a slug beneath his shoe, a cat being tormented by small boys, a naked woman in a public place. Harry avoided crushing the slug, chased off the boys and covered the woman with a blanket.

"So, Gideon said. "In the crudest terms, we have established that you are not insane or dangerous. You are, however, suffering from a trauma, a trauma not unlike that we've seen in all too many men returning from Flanders with battle scars to the mind. Harry, I plan to use hypnosis to help your mind open the doors it is so desperately holding closed. Has anyone ever hypnotized you before?"

"No."

"No need to look apprehensive. You will be aware throughout and, if I find you are becoming upset, I will bring the procedure to an end. Agreed?"

Harry nodded.

"Hard to take your eyes off the river, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"That's good. I want you to sit over here on the armchair.

That's it. Sit back. Take a few deep breaths. Relax. Why do you laugh?"

"Sorry. You just reminded me of someone I used to know."

'Happy memories, I hope."

"Yes," Harry told him, surprised by a memory of lying on a narrow bed, listening to the sounds of a Jermyn Street afternoon through an open window. "From this distance, I believe they are."

"So. Deep breaths. That's it. Relax. And keep your eyes on the river. Find a point in its middle, where the current is strong. Imagine the current is flowing through you. It's sweeping through your mind, sweeping all thoughts away. Your mind is just a chamber. An empty chamber, quite white, utterly peaceful. There are no rules here. You can speak your thoughts and nobody will know. Nobody will judge you. Do you understand?"

"Yes.""Good. Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Tell me who you love."