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Come Away with Me

Sara MacDonald

Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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ONE

February 2006

Adam felt the hairs crawling on the back of his neck. The familiar nightmarish fear was back. He gripped his fishing rod tightly. The woods rose up from the creek behind him dark and dense. He knew it was up there, watching him, he could feel it.

A moment ago, as he turned and reached for his jacket and glanced up at the trees, he had seen that the shadows had changed, knew the dark shape where light had been was someone, something, up there watching him. Waiting. Waiting until he had to pass it on the path before it jumped out at him.

He started to reel in his line, his ears alert for someone passing, then he could rush to the path and walk behind them back to the cottage. There was no sign of anyone else out on the creek path now. The curve of foreshore was deserted, only the sounds of curlews with their thin, quavering cries and a heron standing on one leg and the mist rolling towards him obscuring the sun as the tide slid inexorably in.

When he had secured his line, Adam closed his tin boxes, gathered his binoculars and made a little pile of his belongings. Now, he must turn slowly behind him to reach for his

knapsack. He made himself look upwards into the wood. The shadow had gone. His path was clear. He threw his things into the bag, grabbed his rod and straightened up as the sun broke out again from behind a curtain of mist.

He took a step towards the old barn on the wharf to reach the path beyond it. He jumped violently, as half blinded by the sun he saw something lying against the wall of the building. He stared down at it. It was a woman, curled up on a coat, knees to her chin, wild hair hiding her face. She looked tiny, like a child, her thin arms folded round herself and she was very still. Jenny.

Adam stood frozen. He stared down at her and pity welled up in him, startling him with the power of it. His heart constricted, his eyes pricked at the sight of an adult stricken. His fear evaporated. It all began to make a weird kind of sense. Jenny had lost it. People sometimes went crazy when bad things happened.

He should run back to the cottage. He should fetch his mother, but somehow, he could not leave her lying vulnerable on her own on an old coat like a tramp. He just couldn't. She lay oddly still. He put down his fishing rod, placed his knapsack on the ground and inched nearer to touch her.

She was not dead. Her flesh was warm to his fingers. At his touch she moved and opened her eyes. Adam backed away slightly. He did not know what to say.

Jenny, seeing him, struggled to a sitting position. He saw that her hands shook.

'It's all right,' he said quickly. 'It's OK.'

She stared at him as if coming from some faraway place.

'Adam.' Her voice was husky, as if she had not spoken for some time. She held out a hand towards him. Adam could not quite bring himself to take it. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest. He wanted to run for Ruth. He was out of his depth.

Jenny's hand fell to her side. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I'm so sorry for frightening you.' Her voice was dull, her face bleak.

Adam crouched in front of her. 'Why . . . why were you following me and hiding in the woods? I don't understand.'

Jenny didn't reply and Adam said, 'I'm going to get Mum. It'll be OK. We'll be back in five minutes.'

'I wanted to talk to you, be with you, on your own . . .' Jenny's voice trailed off.

'Why?' Adam was uneasy.

'You are so like Tom. So like him. I somehow thought you were my son; that I was your mother.'

Jenny's eyes looked bruised and her face seemed to have shrunk under her mass of curly hair.

'Forgive me,' she said. 'I must be going mad. I didn't mean to frighten you. I would never hurt you. Please believe that.'

He nodded. 'You're not very well. It's going to be OK. I'm going to get Ruth now.' He hesitated. 'Could you get to the cottage if I help you?'

Jenny shook her head. 'Adam, I'm so very tired.'

Adam leant forward and touched her hand. 'You stay there, Jenny. I won't be long.'

He turned and started to sprint along the path that curled round towards the cottage and his mother. At the bend he slowed to catch his breath. Behind him, he heard the sound of disturbed birds rising noisily from the water, breaking the silence. He turned. Jenny had got up and put on her heavy coat. She was wading purposefully into the water, flowing in fast and black on the incoming tide.

'No!' Adam screamed, as he started to run back, his legs pumping, his breath catching painfully in his chest. 'No, Jenny, no, no, no.'

TWO

August 2005

Rosie lies between us, asleep, fat little bottom in the air; dimpled feet upturned like the inside of pink shells. She is wedged hotly between Tom and me, her face against Tom's arm. Their breath rises and falls in the same shallow rhythm. Asleep, Rosie still looks like a baby; dark curls stuck to her head, cheeks flushed. I have to stop myself putting my lips to those soft cheeks.

Tom is half turned towards us, one hand under his head, the other hand on his thigh, his fingers splayed outwards as if to protect Rosie. His face is buried in the pillow, his short hair sticks up, his face damp from the heat of all our bodies in one bed on a close summer night.

His bare arms and chest are brown and broad. His skin shines with health. He is very fit.

The window is open to catch every breath of wind and I watch him in the yellow light of a street lamp, my body limp with wanting him, with the urge constantly to touch him. I love these snatched moments, these still nights of watching him sleep. I store these nights against the time when he will disappear again.

It is the still hour between night and dawn when London stops briefly and in the silence of the dark I can kid myself that I can hear the distant noise of the sea and the seagulls screaming into a new day.

It is not homesickness, but the luxury of happiness. The knowledge that despite living in a city, I have a life here with the man I love. In a house that fits round us and holds all the people I need to be content, to do the job I love. It is not a perfect happiness because that would be impossible. There are these endless leave-takings which interrupt our lives. I never know where Tom is or when he will be home. These are the shadows.

I must have fallen asleep because when I wake the birds are singing and sunlight is pouring through the open window. I hear Flo slowly going up the second flight of stairs to the workroom on the top floor. What a wonderful day it was when she joined us. She will be checking the work schedules for Monday. In a while she will come in with tea for us and exclaim over Rosie being in our bed again.

I stretch contentedly and then reach over Rosie and rub my fingertip lightly over the surface of Tom's arm. It is as smooth as a roll of silk. My hair falls over Rosie's face and tickles Tom and they both stir.

He yawns, opens one eye and seeing me watching him smiles sleepily and turns on his back. He is unconsciously graceful in his movements. He reminds me of a cat.

He turns to Rosie leaning against him and brushes her hair away from her hot little face. He looks at me suddenly, his eyes intensely blue. It is a rare unguarded moment that shakes me with his vulnerability.

I have always supposed our love to be unequal. Tom is everything to me. I am important, but not the whole for him. In this moment I see his raw exposed love for Rosie and me.

I move towards him and he pulls me over Rosie, burying his head in my hair.

Rosie is instantly awake and laughing. 'Me! Me! Dada!'

Tom puts out his arm and scoops her to us, making her squeal.

Flo knocks on the door. 'Tea?' she calls.

We fly apart and sit up. 'Yes, please. Come in!'

Flo comes in carrying a tea tray. She makes a pretend surprise face at Rosie. 'What are you doing there, young lady?'

Tom would leap out of bed, but he has no clothes on. 'Flo, I wish you wouldn't wait on us. It makes me inordinately guilty.'

'Wisht your noise,' Flo says cheerfully. 'I like the kitchen to myself on Sunday mornings, as you well know.' She puts the tray down and holds out her hand to Rosie. 'Danielle is bringing back a present from Paris for a good little girl who eats up all her breakfast.'

Rosie does not want to leave us or the warmth of the bed. 'Ellie coming home?'

'Tomorrow. Come on, darling, let Mummy and Daddy get dressed, then you can all go out to the park.'

That does the trick. Rosie climbs over us and toddles out with Flo, who shuts the door on us. We drink our tea but we don't get dressed. Tom pulls my nightshirt over my head in a practised sweep and we make love with the intensity of knowing we have only seventy-two hours left together before his leave ends.

I bury my nose in his skin and breathe in his smell. His muscular body emanates a faint edge of danger. He has this sexy trick of trying to keep his eyes open all the time he makes love. His eyes become like purple darting fireflies before they roll back and he explodes. The thrill is his wanting to see me, my face, as he climaxes. When we are out and I see

women staring, I think with astonishment, *He's mine. He's mine. He's really mine.*

He is holding me so tight against him he is hurting me. 'Tom,' I whisper. 'I can't breathe.'

He lets me go, alarmed. 'Sorry, I'm like a bear, I don't know my own strength.'

'I like it,' I say softly, moving to him again. And I do like it. I love the feeling of precariousness in the coiled power of his body; his constant alertness that lies just below the surface, like a second skin. He is unable to switch off totally when he isn't working or in danger.

One night we were both asleep and were woken by a noise. In a swift, unnerving movement Tom was out of bed and across the room silently as a shadow. He slid open a drawer, took something out and crept across the landing. I sat up and froze at his catlike stealth. I watched as he leapt forward and pounced. I heard a scream, snapped on the bedside light and ran to the door.

Tom had someone in a headlock in the dark kitchen. The man was making grunting noises of fear and pain, but it was Danielle who had screamed. She and a boyfriend had come in from the other side of the house to look for coffee. They were both pretty drunk. The man fled down the stairs and out of the front door at record speed. Tom, furious, rounded on Danielle for being so stupidly irresponsible and creeping around in the dark.

I knew Tom's anger was not entirely directed at her but at himself too. He could have seriously hurt the man. Danielle was equally furious and embarrassed. From that day on the door between our flats was kept locked at night. Tom and Danielle did not speak for three days and then they made up for my sake.

That was the only time I had seen the trained and aggressive side of Tom. It adds a sexual frisson to my feelings for

him. Sometimes, in the days before he leaves us again he can turn into a withdrawn stranger and as we grow closer I realise how little I know of his other life.

I watch Tom wheel Rosie across the road towards the park from my workroom at the top of the house. I hate him out of my sight but I am waiting for a phone call from Danielle who is in Paris. Flo could perfectly well take the call but I know that Danielle thinks that I don't take work seriously when Tom is home and it's untrue.

Below me in the kitchen I can hear Flo singing as she moves about, making Sunday lunch. I wander about picking things up and putting them down again, squashing a faint ennui. I start to sketch in a desultory fashion, then, restless, I get up and go to the window.

The pavement is glittery and rain-washed way down below me. It has cooled the air and I can almost smell the wet earth rising up from the garden.

I look right towards the end of the empty road where Tom and Rosie had been a moment ago and panic grips me. I turn and run down the stairs, calling out to Flo that I am going to the park. I wrench open the front door and run down the wide road, cross when the traffic clears and bolt through the park gates.

I make for the pond and when I spot them both feeding ducks I slow down and bend over to get my breath. They are fine. There they are; a large man and a small child, heads together, throwing bread in an arc to a swirling, greedy mass of ducks.

I stand watching them. Rosie feels my presence first. She turns and cries 'Mamma!' and squeals for joy.

Tom laughs. 'You've absconded, how lovely.'

As we throw bread together, Tom says, 'Life here with you and Rosie makes me wonder why on earth I am not a civilian, you know.'

'You!' I laugh at the thought. 'Oh yes! I can just imagine you catching the tube in the rush hour every morning in a suit.'

'Well, it will come to that, I expect, even if I stay in the army. I will get a paunch and have a desk job with the MOD . . .'

Rosie, tired of throwing bread, climbs back into her pushchair and watches the ducks diving. She shakes with laughter at their waggling tails and claps her hands together.

Tom bends to kiss her. 'What a happy little soul you are, Rosie Holland.'

We turn and walk slowly back to the gates arm in arm. A damp little wind brings the pungent scent of wet earth again. It is only August, but I am suddenly reminded of autumn and the end of summer, and I shiver.

Tom pulls me towards him. 'Sometimes, on peaceful family Sundays like this, I wonder what the hell I am doing with my life, Jen. Chasing what?'

I am amused and cynical because I know him so well. 'Family Sundays on a regular basis would bore you absolutely rigid. You'd prowl around like a leopard, driving us all mad.'

Tom grins down at me. 'Talking about predatory, it's been a great leave with Danielle in Paris.'

I sigh. 'That's unkind and she's home tomorrow. I wish you'd try to get on better. You both have to challenge each other all the time. It's become a habit.'

When we get in Flo has done everything and I feel guilty. I wish she wouldn't do so much for us.

'I would have set the table . . .'

'Here we go.' Tom is pouring generous gins.

'My dear girl, every Sunday we have the same conversation. It's not a chore. I *love* cooking Sunday lunch.'

'Did Danielle ring?'

'Yes. She's sold everything except those long linen dresses; too long for Parisians, apparently.'

'Damn. She was right then. I'll have to try them up north. Did she sound OK?'

'She sounded as if she was in the middle of a party,' Flo says diplomatically.

'That makes a change then.' Tom lifts Rosie into her high chair.

Annoyed, I defend Danielle. 'She has no family. There's only Flo and me. Don't you see? We are *smug marrieds* to her and when you get pompous you just reinforce her prejudices. You make her worse. Please don't judge her.'

Tom immediately apologises. 'Sorry, Jen. You're right. I catch myself doing it. It's just that she seems to get more promiscuous the older she gets. I do think the way she behaves is irresponsible. I know she has her own flat and what she does with her life is up to her, but I don't have to like it.'

Flo turns from the oven. 'Danielle does have sudden bouts of promiscuity, Tom, and I have talked to her about it because I worry about her safety too. You have to realise it is all about low self-esteem. I know nothing about her childhood, but something happened there. Try to be kind, darling.'

I fill Rosie's little bowl with food and hand it to him. He places it in front of her and cuts it into tiny pieces.

'Now I feel like a pig. Danielle's such a head-tossing sultry beauty that it's difficult to believe she's promiscuous because she lacks self-worth and not because she just likes sex.'

Rosie lifts her spoon and bangs it in the gravy.

'No!' we all say together and Rosie, stunned to hear an almost unknown word, stops, plastic spoon in mid air.

That afternoon we leave Rosie with Flo and go to a gallery opening and then ice skating. After a Chinese meal that Tom insists on, we stumble home.

Tom has drunk too much. 'I'm going to be dry for a long time, darling.'

'Good thing too,' I mutter, heaving him up the steps and getting the key in the door with difficulty. We stumble up the stairs and Tom wants to go in to see Rosie.

'Don't wake her, Tom. I'd like her to sleep in her own bed tonight.'

He watches her for a long time. He seems suddenly sober. 'You don't realise how much you'll change when you have a child. The thought of anything happening to Rosie is . . . unthinkable. I feel so protective of you both. I don't take either of you for granted, ever. When I'm somewhere grim, I think of you and know you're both somewhere warm and safe. *My mainstay*. Without you, I couldn't do the job I do without becoming bleak and hardened.'

We wrap our arms round each other and watch our child sleep. I want to weep because in forty-eight hours he will have flown away again, and the house will be quieter and emptier, and I will have this sick feeling in the pit of my stomach until he phones or a letter arrives without a post-mark and I know he is safe *somewhere* and I can begin to count the days until he comes home again.

THREE

February 2006
When Bea got in from shopping the house was empty and she found a note from James on the kitchen table.

> *Darling, Flo rang from the London house. She is worried about Jenny who seems to have gone missing. Apparently, Jenny met Ruth Freidman again after all this time. Bizarre. Ruth is now on holiday in Cornwall and I have gone down to that creek house at St Minyon to see if they are both there. Try not to worry. I'm sure Jenny must be making her way home. J. x*

Bea's mouth went dry. She picked up the phone immediately and rang Flo. An Asian girl answered. Both Florence and Danielle were with a VIP client at the moment. Could she take a message?

'Would you just say that Jenny's mother rang? If Flo could get in touch as soon as she can, I'd be grateful.'

'Of course. I will tell her.'

Bea went out into the garden still holding the phone. There was a cold east wind and the sea below her glinted fierce

and navy-blue. She paced up and down the terrace among the wilted pot plants, a knot growing in her stomach with a chill premonition of disaster.

She turned and looked back at the house and the drive curling round to the gate. *Ruth*. Bea remembered clearly a thin child with fair plaits rounding the corner of the house, her small pale face anxiously searching for Jenny.

Ruth walking up the hill from Downalong each Sunday, desperate for an escape from home and a welcome here.

Bea looked up at the attic window on the right of the house, which had been Jenny's bedroom. She could almost hear the giggles emanating out into the garden with the sound of the seagulls. *Jenny and Ruth. Ruth and Jenny.* The two of them had raced about together for all those years of childhood like odd little twins and then whoosh, Ruth was gone, and how Jenny had grieved.

Bea went inside again and into James's study. She saw that his medical bag was missing.

FOUR

August 2005

Tom wakes with a start. His heart is thumping loudly in the silent house as if he's had a nightmare. If he has, he can't remember it. He turns on his back, sure there is something, some small niggling warning he should recapture from sleep, but he can't conjure it up.

He gets out of bed and pulls on his bathrobe. He goes to the uncurtained window and looks out. It's almost dawn and he watches the pink tinge grow behind the rooftops. He turns back to the bed and looks at Jenny sleeping. He feels such an overpowering sense of love and fear flood through him that he catches his breath.

He moves out of the room and across the landing, flinging the shadows away, swearing at these moods that always come on the last days of his leave. Rosie is curled like a dormouse in her cot, the same wiry hair as her mother, the same way of sleeping, a small clone. He smiles and tucks in her arms, carefully pulls up the covers over her plump little body. Rosie. Flesh of his flesh.

He shivers. The shadows in the room creep nearer, encroach from all sides. He can't turn and face them because

he doesn't know from where the most danger comes.

He leaves the room, goes into the sitting room and sits in his battered leather armchair. He loves this house. This marvellous, lived-in Victorian house with its high ceilings and huge casement windows. He loves everything about his life except returning to this nasty little war he is unsure he still believes in. He has to cull these feelings; kill them with one blow before they take hold. He has younger, less experienced soldiers under him, nineteen-year-old boys who rely on him. It's the life he's chosen. He has no right to maverick thoughts, dread or self-pity.

Impatient with himself, he gets up to pour himself a brandy. He'll sit and listen to the silent house move and breathe and creak around him. He'll absorb into himself from the shadows of night the hub of Jenny's busy days. The constant coming and going and chatter and giggles; the sound of the phone or doorbell; the noise of his daughter's small footsteps on the polished floor; the touch of Jenny's hand as she passes him clutching rolls of coloured material, turning back to smile at him, her face alive with love. All these things are the routine of her days when he's away; her enclosed, safe, female world.

Marriage has made everything harder. There's so much more to lose, risks become calculated, less instinctive. It's hard not to grow softer, to lose your edge. He swallows the brandy quickly. *Stop thinking*.

He falls asleep in the armchair and dreams again. Dreams he's getting off a plane in Northern Ireland, or Bosnia, or Iraq. It's pouring with rain and his heart is heavy with the loss of something . . .

There's something he should remember but it dances out of reach, just beyond memory. All he can feel is the icy night rain coming in on a wind that chills him to the bone.

He turns to look at the young soldiers following him off

the plane. They shimmer in the heat blasts of the plane warming up behind them. They have a dreamlike quality as they float towards him and he realises with sudden clarity that time as he knows it does not exist. These soldiers, he himself, are shimmering in some timeless zone. They are the soldiers of yesterday and the soldiers of tomorrow. They are smiling, flirting with adventure, dancing with death. They do not understand it will never end, these brutal little wars against an unseen enemy. There they stride with their eager, innocent smiles and their new, squeaky boots and heavy packs, and he wants to shout them a warning. We'll never win. It will just go on and on and on.

Yet, as he moves towards them he sees his own younger face among them, determined and alight with challenge. They move, laughing, through him as he stands facing them on the tarmac and he realises that they cannot see him for he is not there. He does not exist. His time has been and gone.

With relief he wakes. It is morning. He is in England. Sunlight shines across the polished floor. He laughs with relief. Where should he take Jenny and Rosie on this precious last full day of his leave?