Say You Love Me

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Published by Accent Press

Extract

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SAY YOU LOVE ME
By Marion Husband

Chapter 1

Mark said, ‘I’ve decided to go home.’

In the flat above their florist shop, Luke and Tony looked sympathetic. Carefully, Tony said, ‘When you say home, you mean…?’

‘Thorp.’

‘Because …?’

Mark bowed his head, embarrassed by their concern and the careful way they avoided the relevant words. There was a vase of lilies on the mantelpiece and their intense perfume filled the room and deepened the silence he seemed unable to break. He almost blurted out that he was too strange to be sitting here in their tidy living room, that didn’t they think he was polluting the very air they breathed? He was filthy after all – couldn’t they tell? His flesh crawled. He mumbled, ‘I just thought I’d go home – see Dad. A bit of a holiday, really.’ He thought how northern his voice sounded when he couldn’t be bothered. It was a sign of his depression: these slack, Teesside vowels. Luke and Tony exchanged looks and Mark tried to read their expressions, knowing he looked too hopeful. He wanted them to tell him not to go, and that it would all be all right to stay and do nothing. But their pity had become exasperation; he looked down at the glass of wine cradled in his hand. ‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘I’m afraid I haven’t been much company tonight.’

The two men were quick to deny it. Luke glanced towards the dining table, still littered with coffee cups and wine glasses, the plate of ravaged cheeses sweating and weeping amongst grape stalks and biscuit crumbs. All the other guests had left; only Mark outstayed his welcome. Mark thought of the woman who had sat across the table from him, a dentist with dark, clever eyes, good-looking enough. Luke and Tony had high hopes that he and the dentist would hit if off, hopes that were unspoken, but demonstrated in the way the two men became more flirtatious around them, as though some of their playfulness would rub off on their awkward guests. The dentist was called Helen. She was the kind of woman he ought to like but didn’t; adding to his sense of hopelessness.

Tony said, ‘Mark, why don’t you come and stay with us for a while?’

Mark thought about staying in Luke and Tony’s spare room, of waiting in bed, listening to the two of them preparing to go downstairs to work. Luke would sing; he sang often, the latest song by Madonna or Kylie, and Tony would nag him to be quick: they had deliveries to attend to, wreaths to assemble. The smell of their coffee would drift into his room like a gentle hint that he should get up and stop moping, although neither of them would use such a word as mope. Luke and Tony believed what he was going through was far too serious for the kind of stiff upper lip, grin-and-bear-it words his father would use. Suddenly he longed to

be home, in his bedroom where the bright colours of the Persian rug broke the shadow of the plane tree that grew outside his window, only to remember that it had been days since he'd slept a full night in his bed. Lately he fell into fitful dozes on the couch, afraid of sleeping, of his violent, chaotic dreams.

Tony said, 'Listen, love, the offer stands. If you go home and find you can't cope with all that family stuff, come back here and stay with us. Or one of us could stay with you. You're not alone in this.'

Luke said, 'Of course you're not.'

I am alone, Mark wanted to say. Utterly, totally. He looked at the two men sitting opposite him on the china blue silk sofa. Tony's arm stretched along the sofa's back, his fingers dangling millimetres away from Luke's shoulder. Such casual intimacy used to reassure him: here was love and respect and tenderness. Now it just seemed smug and condescending. He got up, surprising himself with the suddenness of his move so that he felt too big and awkward amongst the knick-knacks and artful arrangements of flowers. He downed the last of his wine in one swallow and knew that he must look rude, in too much of a hurry to leave.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I should go.'

They followed him down the narrow flight of stairs that rose from the doorway leading out on to the street. On the pavement they embraced him in turn. Holding him at arms' length, Tony searched his face. 'You'll be all right,' he said. It was a statement, as though he'd seen something in his expression that reassured him. Tony had told him once that he was strong, that he could sense his northern grit beneath the soft veneer living in the south had lent him. Mark was tempted to ask him if he truly believed he was a hard man. How ridiculous he would sound.

In his car, he sat for a moment before turning on the engine. He pictured his flat, how he had left a lamp on in each room, how the feeble, forty-watt bulbs would leave too much shadow and darkness. He needed one hundred-watt bulbs, the kind of harsh, no-nonsense light that illuminated his father's house. Simon didn't go in for the soft ambience of lamps. Simon had to have blinding, white, overhead light as though he was about to examine a patient.

A week ago Mark had been to see his GP. Years since he had visited the practice, he found that the doctor he remembered as being a little like Simon had retired, replaced by a girl a good ten years younger than himself. On her desk she had pictures of a fat toddler clutching a baby, on her wall a poster informing that *Breast is Best*. He had felt like a trespasser. She had ended up taking his blood pressure, listening to his blood pounding with a professional little frown. He couldn't bring himself to say what he'd intended to say if the doctor had been the older, old-fashioned man he'd expected. *'I am so tired,'* he'd wanted to say. And, if he'd felt brave, *'I think I should be put away.'* And the kindly, twinkle-eyed doctor who wore a tweed suit and smelt faintly of cigars would not be shocked or disgusted as he coaxed out his confession but rather brisk and even dismissive. 'My dear boy,' the doctor would cry, 'I daresay we all think of ourselves as monsters from time to time!'

Mark put on his seatbelt and started the car. He thought of Susan, who had told him that if he was a monster he was one of a rare and exotic breed, a line that must be nearing extinction. 'You're the last of your kind,' she said. Straddling his body she'd leaned forward and brushed her mouth against his. She'd whispered, 'I'm not scared,' and the smile in her voice had made him laugh in despair.

'I am,' he'd said.

She had sat up and frowned at him thoughtfully, her head cocked to one side. At last she'd said, 'I wish you were a monster, Mark, a larger than life shit – I wouldn't feel guilty about fucking you then.'

They never mentioned guilt and she had glanced away as she said it, only to look at him again, not quite meeting his eye as she smiled crookedly. A few minutes earlier she had been wrapping her legs around his waist and groaning his name in a climax he only half-believed she faked. Now the guilt she'd conjured made her look sheepish. 'It's just *sex* that's all,' she said. 'I do what I do because you're the most beautiful man I've ever seen.' She laughed a little and rested her forehead against his. 'Think of it as a basic urge I have to satisfy, like thirst. I would shrivel up without you.'

He remembered holding her head between his hands and lifting her face away from his. The fresh wounds on his back and buttocks stung and he knew the sheets would be spotted with blood and he would feel ashamed as he stripped the bed and bundled the linen into the washing machine. But for that moment he wanted her to tear at his broken skin with her finger nails, to open him up and make him bleed more. He had almost asked her to stay the night in his bed so that later, later… Instead he had closed his eyes, sickened by his own basic urges. She had kissed him. 'I should go,' she'd said. 'Or he might begin to wonder where I am.'

Mark turned the car into his street. He parked in a space only a few doors from his flat and locked it with the remote, only to try the door to check it was secure. The street was quiet but he was afraid that the car would be stolen and that its theft would topple him over the edge. He was afraid too that the flat would be burgled, that one day he would return home and find it plundered and vandalised, graffiti sprayed on the walls, fresh faeces on the carpet – the shit-scared leaving their calling card. Climbing the steps that led from the street to his front door he saw it in his mind's eye – drawers pulled out and spilling their contents, his books and papers fanning across the floor, pages fluttering in the draft from the jemmied window. He hesitated before turning the key in the lock and going inside.

The hallway at least was as he left it, the lamp on the table spreading its yellow glow on the polished floor and the muted colours of the rug. Next to the lamp the lilies he bought each Saturday from Tony's shop had changed in his absence from heavy buds to half-unfurled blooms, their scent already filling the hall. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the table, saw that he looked haggard, as though he'd been drinking all night in some filthy dive rather than struggling to make small talk with a pretty dentist. Resisting the compulsion to peer at himself, he turned away and walked though to the kitchen where his answering machine beeped its quiet, persistent alarm. Two messages.

He pressed play and poured himself a scotch as Simon's recorded voice said, 'Hello? Mark? It's Dad – just wanted to say I'll expect you about two o'clock tomorrow. I'll rustle up some lunch. Anyway…are you all right, my boy? Sorry I missed you….' He trailed off, an old man uncomfortable with machines that didn't allow for mistakes, that he knew made him sound older and more unsure of himself and the world than he had ever been in his long life. Sipping his drink, Mark deleted his father's message. At once the confident tone of his brother had him setting down his glass and listening carefully to the nuances in his voice.

Ben said, 'Hi Mark. Dad's just told me you're coming home tomorrow. Spur of the moment decision? Well, good, we need to talk, don't we? I'll look forward to seeing you – safe journey.'

Mark played his brother's message again. Ben's voice was light, friendly, the voice he no doubt used to reassure his patients. He pictured his older brother standing at the French windows of his study, looking out over his large, manicured garden as he spoke into the phone. Behind him his desk would be bare except for his laptop and an orderly pile of strictly relevant reference books. His diary would be open on the day. Mark imagined his own name written in red and underlined on its page. He wondered if Ben had hesitated before punching his number into the phone, if he'd felt that sudden, nervous quickening of the heart. Ben

would have taken a breath, been firm with himself: it was just a phone call to his brother. Mark played the message again. He fancied he could hear Ben's baby son crying in the background. He picked up his drink and pressed delete, erasing his brother's voice mid-flow.

He went into his own sitting room. His flat was the ground floor of a Victorian terrace house. The builders had taken care with its conversion and all the original features that estate agents liked so much were still in place. The flat's rooms were airy, with high ceilings and deep skirting boards. He had an open fireplace that was much admired but never lit. In the alcoves on either side of the marble mantelpiece were floor-to-ceiling bookcases so crammed with books that some had to be stacked on the floor. Most of the books he hadn't opened for years; often he imagined getting rid of some of them, but knew that the process of selection would take hours, that he would be caught up in reading dust jackets and opening lines and that the words would drag him into the past and hold him prisoner there. These books were best ignored, but certain books, the first editions and flea market finds Susan had inscribed with clever dedications, he had hidden away in a suitcase in the spare bedroom. One day, with a decisive bravery he could barely imagine now, he would dispose of those.

He sat down in a leather armchair beside the fire, a pile of books on Renaissance art at his fingertips, the next tentative idea for a novel to research. He rested his head against the chair's high back and closed his eyes, too tired to go to bed to wrestle with sleep. He took the remote control and switched on the television. On BBC twenty-four hour news American soldiers had been killed in Iraq; a child had gone missing from the Rosehill housing estate on the outskirts of Durham.

He turned up the volume. The estate was close to Simon's house and he remembered its rows of 1950s semi-detached council houses, flat-fronted and pebble-dashed, that he and Ben used to pass on their shortcuts to the park. The news camera panned along the missing child's street and he noticed that the houses looked less raw than they had in his 1960s childhood. Trees had grown in front gardens, cars were parked bumper to bumper along the kerb, suggesting a kind of prosperity that was missing in those days. Despite the fact that they had moved away to the leafy suburbs of Thorp, Ben would still play football with the boys from Rosehill on the green spaces between the squares of houses and tower blocks.

He had always been excluded from these games, considered too weedy, too much of a girl, a *puff*. He was an embarrassment; Ben disowned him whenever he thought he could get away with it. As a child Ben led a double life and a large part of the subterfuge was making sure his association with such a useless boy didn't taint him. Ben could easily act the part of the posh boy from the big house but he was also one of the lads, a rough kid who swore and fought and smoked *Embassy* cigarettes openly in the street.

The news turned to sport and Mark switched off. He went over Ben's message again and thought how the lightness of his voice was faked to disguise his urgency. Ben needed to talk to him and for the moment this need was the most important thing in his brother's life. For the first time Ben craved his approval. Mark felt his stomach turn over at the very idea of his brother's new obsession.

Last month, late one evening as he worked at his desk, he had answered the telephone absently, only to sit up straighter as Ben said, 'Mark. Hello. Hello?' His brother had laughed self-consciously. 'Mark? Are you there? Can you hear me?'

'Yes. Yes, I can hear you. Sorry –'

'You sound distracted. Do you have someone with you?' Ben laughed again, an edge to his voice as he said, 'Is this a bad time?'

'No. How are you?' Mark had looked down at the last line he had typed, deleting an adjective despite himself. He said, 'How are Kitty and the baby?'

‘They’re great. Well, Nathan is teething again, so perhaps not so great…a few sleepless nights, nothing Kit can’t cope with.’

Mark thought of the girl Ben had married a year earlier. Ben’s child-bride, Simon called her, his voice gruff with affection. Kitty was beautiful, an elfin girl Simon adored. Whenever they met Mark felt huge and clumsy beside her; he also felt old, of course, every day of his forty-three years an unbridgeable chasm between himself and his sister-in-law.

Ben said, ‘How are you, Mark?’

‘Fine.’

‘Good. That’s good.’ He paused. On a rush of breath he said, ‘So, you’re OK?’

‘Is there something wrong, Ben?’

‘No! No, not wrong. Not really…’ He’d sighed. ‘I don’t want you to be upset, that’s all.’

Mark’s hand had tightened around the phone. ‘Go on.’

‘It’s just that I’ve been thinking, since Nath was born…Mark, I want you to understand…’

And his brother had gone on, cajoling him to understand. When he had finally put the phone down Mark had rushed to the bathroom and thrown up. For some minutes he sat on the bathroom floor, his head against the cold tiled wall. He tried to think clearly, to be calm and rational as Ben had insisted he should be. Ben had said, ‘I’m not asking for your permission, Mark – I just wanted you to know…I wanted you to hear it from me…’

Mark remembered the pauses Ben had left for him to fill. He hadn’t been able to speak. Already the bile had risen in his throat and Ben had been exasperated with his silence. ‘Mark, for God’s sake! I can’t believe this has come as a surprise!’ Then, more gently, he had said, ‘I know this might be difficult for you. But Danny is my father – *our* father, our flesh and blood. I have to find him.’

Mark got up and turned the television off. He finished his drink and went into the kitchen to place the glass in the dishwasher. He would wake to a tidy home, everything in its place. His flat was beautiful – everyone said so. He was told he had exquisite taste. His guests admired the oil paintings of seascapes on his pale walls, his elegant, antique furniture, the way his few rooms seemed so full of light, of a kind of *grace*, Tony had once said, and had looked at him curiously as though he couldn’t quite accept that they weren’t lovers.

Mark undressed for bed. He brushed his teeth and avoided his eyes in the bathroom mirror. He hated the sight of himself, more so since Ben had told him he was set on finding their natural father, Danny. Since then his face was even more a reminder of trouble. He looked so starkly like Danny, so unlike the blond, blue-eyed Simon that it was obvious that he was only an adopted son. Ben could pass for Simon’s blood but not him. He was Danny’s, through and through. And yet it was Ben who wanted to find Danny, Ben who wanted to reach back as though their blood held some knowledge he couldn’t get along without.

Mark gripped the edge of the sink, sickened again by the idea of Ben excavating their shared past. For the first time it occurred to him that his brother might have dug up more than he’d admitted to, and he pictured Ben meeting him outside Simon’s house tomorrow with Danny at his side. He wondered if he would faint with fear or run like a madman. He forced himself to look at his reflection full on. Danny gazed back at him. He turned away quickly and went to bed.