THE SILENT STARS GO BY

SALLY NICHOLLS

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To my grandmother, Mary Nicholls,
who kept her war-baby

Crowshurst Farm
Crowshurst
North Yorkshire
9th December 1919

Dear Margot,

I do not wish to be a millstone round your neck, and if you really would rather have nothing more to do with me, I won't be such an ass as to insist that you uphold your promises or anything beastly like that. But I think it only polite to inform you that I shall be coming home for Christmas and we are likely – in the usual run of things – to find ourselves somewhat in one another's pockets.

We may no longer be lovers, but I would hate to think we were ever anything but friends. I cannot claim to understand why you chose to ignore my previous communications, but I trust that you have your reasons. I must say, I think you might have the decency to tell me what they are.

If you have heard any ill of me, please allow me the chance to explain myself. Though I can't imagine what the devil it is you might have heard.

I remain your most obedient etc (truly, Margot, I do),

Harry Singer

Margot Allen sat in the corner of the third-class compartment carriage and read this letter for the fifteenth time. Her mother had forwarded it without comment from the vicarage. The wheels of the train went *clackerty-clack, clackerty-clack* over the tracks, the little steam heater blasted hot air into the compartment, and outside the windows the Vale of York swept past, all grey and dark green beneath the midwinter sky.

Her small hands, in pale, rather worn, leather gloves, rested on her skirt, which was the exact blue of her eyes. Her blonde hair was perfectly arranged. The darns in her overcoat were almost – but not quite – invisible.

Margot was nineteen, but right now she felt herself fully forty-five at least.

The letter, like those which had preceded it, remained unanswered.

I trust that you have your reasons . . .

She leaned her head back onto the seat.

Clearly things couldn't go on like this. This secret should never have been kept from him. One way or another, they were going to have to face it.

Jocelyn

The station at Thwaite was a one-platform village halt, with a single sad-looking flowerpot and not even a shelter from the wind. Jocelyn was waiting on the platform, and Margot felt a sudden, unexpected rush of love at the sight of her – her hair falling down out of her hat and her hand-me-down coat hanging rather lumpishly at the back. Darling Jos. It was lovely to be somewhere where people loved you.

The sisters embraced.

'Hullo!'

'Hullo, yourself. Where's Mother?'

'Presiding over schoolroom tea. Ernest's train got in just after luncheon. You remember what a beastly lot of fuss there always is.'

'Heavens, yes.' They exchanged rueful glances. 'You'd think no child had ever been sent away to school before Mother's boys. Stephen home yet?'

'Not till next week. Is that all your things? Father's got the car this afternoon, so we'd better find a porter to take them up to the house.'

'Fancy us with a car!' Margot gave her younger sister a real smile. 'Oh, look – there's a porter there! I say!'

The suitcases safely handed over, the sisters set off through the village towards home.

How lovely it was to be back. Each time, the feeling of home surprised her; the clear air, so different to the coal-smoke of Durham. The dales above the village, and the fields below, the particularly Yorkshire scent of frost and sheep-farming countryside. Home.

The vicarage was a rambling early Victorian affair. It had been built in the days when vicars were expected to produce eight or nine children for the good of the Empire and – Margot's mother often said – had been bleeding its occupants dry ever since.

It was a huge, draughty building, for ever in a state of general disrepair. The chimneys smoked, the windows rattled, and it was furnished with a mixture of dilapidated odds and ends, left behind by previous vicars and their families. It was always cold, even in the middle of summer. In winter, ice froze in the bedroom jugs and on the windowpanes, and everyone had chilblains, despite untold layers of woollen underwear and

petticoats. Four children still at home and the perpetual impossibility of finding servants, on top of her duties as the vicar's wife, meant their mother lived in a state of permanent exhaustion. The garden was a tangled wilderness of fruit trees, chickens and scraggly vegetables.

The Allen children were accepted eccentrics. Bright, bookish and insular, their childhood had been one of private games and fierce alliances. Margot had always been the odd one out. While her siblings were angular and awkward and – why not say it? – plain, Margot was something of a beauty. This, in a family which considered humility to be next to godliness, was not always an advantage. Margot was not stupid – none of the Allen children were – but she'd had a reputation as 'difficult' from early childhood.

Margot remembered this as an intense determination for something that was 'hers'. Toys in the Allen nursery were generally held communally, clothes and other possessions were handed down to younger siblings, and a common front was expected to be presented. Family honour was so important that Margot had once grumbled that anyone would think they were a duke's children instead of a clergyman's.

To be different was . . . not exactly frowned upon, but definitely considered 'up yourself'. 'She's no better

than she ought to be,' was one of Nana's greatest slurs. If a vicarage child did well at something – and they generally were somewhere near the top of their classes – they were expected not to make a fuss of it, to say 'Thank you' for any praise, and politely change the subject. Demurring, 'Oh, I'm rotten at Latin really' was considered 'affected', but boasting was considered 'stuck-up' and was even worse. Margot could still remember bouncing home aged nine delighted because a stranger in the street had described her as 'a most striking child'. She had been firmly sat upon by her older brother Stephen, and told by her father to 'Consider the lilies of the field.'

'The ones that toil not, neither do they spin?' she'd said. 'Does that mean I'm excused chores?'

Margot knew she was considered stuck-up. She had been christened Margaret, a name she had always hated, and had changed it to Margot aged fourteen, refusing to answer to Margaret until her family had had to admit defeat. She knew Stephen and Jocelyn and even Ruth had always considered her something of an ass. None of them cared about how they looked. But Margot had always loved beautiful things. When the Hendersons at the manor house would bring weekend guests to church, she would sit and stare at their dresses. There was never enough money to go around in the vicarage. Margot had

spent her childhood in hand-me-downs from various cousins and home-made creations run up on the family Singer by Mother.

She had an eye for colour and line, and a determination to look well. Even now, after all her troubles, she still kept her hair carefully smoothed back, her eyebrows plucked, her fingernails manicured.

Nowadays, that girl seemed very long ago and far away. Nowadays, Margot wasn't difficult. She wasn't much of anything, really. Sometimes she felt as though all her personality and contrariness had been washed away, leaving something limp and wet-raggish and spinsterish, if you could be such a thing at nineteen.

Or perhaps she had just grown up.

As a child, she had often wondered if she were a foundling, or perhaps swapped at birth. It would be just like her father to take on a villager's child in need of a home. Except of course, Margot's mother wouldn't be a villager really – she would be an earl's daughter fleeing disgrace. Meeting her father by chance on her desperate flight, she had been so struck by his goodness, she'd sworn him to secrecy. And now her brothers had all been killed, and the family were coming to find their one true heir . . .

It was a childish enough story, and of course, she had known it wasn't really true. She had the look of her

grandmother anyway, and the same fair hair as Stephen and Ernest (Jocelyn and Ruth tended more to mouse). But she could still remember the awfulness of feeling so out of favour, so odd one out. Margot supposed that her mother loved her. But she had never been entirely sure that she *liked* her.

At least her mother liked James. Margot was grateful for that every . . . well, every time she reminded herself to be, which was less often than she ought. Her mother loved James. Though how anyone could do anything *but* love him!

'How's James?' she said abruptly to Jocelyn.

Jocelyn, who had been waiting for this, gave a private grimace.

'He's well. You'll see – we're to join them for nursery tea. He's talking so much more than when you saw him at half term!'

'And he's . . .' Margot knew she was being a dope, but she said it anyway, as she always did. '. . . he's happy?'

'Yes, he's happy.' Jocelyn looked at her sister. 'He's a very happy child, Margot. Mother and Father treat him just the same as they do Ruth and Ernest. You don't need me to tell you that.'

Margot stiffened.

'I do though, don't I?' she said. 'That's the whole problem.'

James

'Margot! Margot's home!'

Ruth and Ernest came clattering down the stairs and flung themselves on their sister with an enthusiasm that Margot knew would not last the evening. Eleven-year-old Ruth had shot up since half term – her thin, mousy plaits bounced around her face as she capered in the hallway. Ernest looked taller too and somehow older than his eight years, impossibly neat in his grey flannel suit.

He said, 'Hullo, Margot.' A perfect little stolid Englishman.

'Did you get my letter?' said Ruth. 'I've decided what I'm going to be when I grow up.' She hopped up and down. 'I'm going to be a detective inspector and solve crimes. Women can be policemen now, did you know? Ernest and I are going to practise this hols, only we haven't got a mystery to solve yet. You don't know one, do you?'

'That would be telling,' said Margot. There was, of

course, a mystery – well, not a mystery exactly, but a family secret hiding right under Ruth's nose. But Margot had no intention of telling her about it.

'Hullo, darling,' said Margot's mother, kissing her. She looked tired, Margot thought. She wore an overall over a limp brown dress which had definitely seen better days. Her greyish hair was beginning to tumble out of its hairpins. 'How was the journey? Not too tiring?'

'Not a bit.' Margot tried to be pleased to see her, but she could already feel the familiar tensing in her stomach. There was no use denying it, she was jealous of her mother.

'Where's James?' she said.

'Upstairs. He's just woken up from his nap. Shall we go and say "hullo"?'

'If it wouldn't be too much trouble,' said Margot stiffly. She felt obscurely criticised, as she often did at home, though the rational part of her mind could see that she had no reason to. She was also annoyed that James wasn't downstairs to meet her. All week, she had been counting down the hours and then the minutes until she saw him. Was he being deliberately kept out of her way? No, surely not. She could feel the nerves buzzing in her arms and stomach. She must remember not to assume the worst of everybody.

*

James was sitting at his little table by the nursery fire, a plate of bread and milk and stewed plums on the table in front of him. Margot's heart gave a leap. He was pushing a wooden horse across the table and humming to himself – a small, solemn-looking boy of two, with fair hair falling into his eyes, looking very much as she'd done as a child. The nursemaid, Doris, was sitting with her feet up on the nursery fender reading what looked like a penny novelette. She started when they came in and thrust the book hastily to one side.

Margot's mother said, 'Perhaps not on duty, Doris, do you think?' and Doris said, 'No, ma'am, sorry, ma'am,' confusedly.

James looked up as they came in and flushed pink with pleasure. 'Mummy!' he said – but not to Margot, of course, to her mother. He pushed aside the chair and ran over to her. Margot's mother picked him up.

'Hullo, darling. Look who's here!'

At this, James went suddenly shy and whispered, 'Ernest 'n' Margot.'

'Aren't you going to go and say hullo?' said Doris, and he buried his head in Margot's mother's shoulder.

Margot scowled. She was hurt by James's shyness, and hurt that he hadn't seemed pleased to see her. The glimpse of Doris with the novelette alarmed her too. She'd never been sure about Doris, who was sixteen, and

the daughter of one of the local farmhands. Should Mother have hired someone so young? Of course, their own Nana was too poorly now with with rheumatics and had gone back to live with her married daughter, and Margot knew servants were hard to find, but still – couldn't Mother have found someone more suitable now that the War was over, and everyone was coming out of the services?

And then there was James himself. He looked so much older! How was it possible that a child could change so much in a few short months? What sort of mother was she, to stay away from him for so long?

She cleared her throat and said, 'Hullo, James.'

James wriggled and buried his head further into her mother's collarbone.

Ernest fumbled in his pocket. 'I bought you a present, Jamie-o.'

James's head lifted in interest. Margot felt another squirm of jealousy – why hadn't she thought of that?

'Look, James – see what your brother's bought you,' said Doris.

Margot felt a flash of hatred.

Ernest brought out a piece of barley-sugar on a string, somewhat covered in pocket-fluff and what looked like biscuit-crumbs.

Margot's mother said, 'Really, Ernest!'

'Look, it's a sweetie!' Doris said. Then, as James still tended to shyness, 'Go on then, pet – you take it.'

James ventured far enough out to grab the string, and retreated again.

Doris, clearly trying to make up for the novelette, asked, 'What do you say?' and he mumbled, 'Tank you,' into the barley-sugar.

With a glance at Margot, her mother said, 'He'll soon open up. Shall we ring for tea?'

'I don't mind,' said Margot. 'Whatever you'd rather.'

She was determined not to show that she cared.