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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, had 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 occupants of the building. 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, to be individual, 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. Neither 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, and 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 mother, but she could 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 all 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 little 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. She 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' 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 she 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.

Later

After nursery tea, Margot was sent upstairs – as she always was as a child – to unpack and rest before it was time to dress for dinner. She was to sleep in her old bedroom, the one which she had once shared with Jocelyn and was now Jocelyn's own. Once upon a time – was it really only three years ago? – her side of the room had been a mess of stockings, powder compacts, toast crumbs and illustrated weeklies. Now her bed stood neatly made and impersonal. Jocelyn's possessions had colonised what had once been her territory; her books on the shelves, her clothes in the drawers, her old ragdolls still lounging on the windowsill next to Margot's ballerina music-box and the pot-bellied piggy bank that said *A PRESENT FROM SCARBOROUGH* across its back. Margot was oddly pleased to see that her influence was still present. There was only so much one could take to a cubicle in a boarding house. In the drawers of the

dressing table, there were old hair-grips and scrapbooks, pressed flowers from dances, and half empty bottles of perfume. Old clothes still lay folded in her chest of drawers. There was even – somewhere – a lock of James's hair, and his first little outfit, hidden away with old diaries and love letters from Harry, letters she couldn't bear to take with her to Durham.

Harry.

She would have to reply to him. Otherwise she would turn up to church on Christmas Day and there he would *be*.

She sat down on the bed. Jocelyn, who had come up behind her with the other case, said 'I think it's going to be rather a queer Christmas this year. Our first real one since the War – with everyone here, I mean.'

'Has Mummy been completely sick-making over it?' Margot said. 'Stephen home and all that.'

Last Christmas Stephen had still been in Belgium, awaiting his discharge. And there'd been the influenza, their father so busy, rushing around visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved. It had been a rather awful sort of Christmas all round.

And then Cecil Carmichael at the Willows had put a bullet through his brain. Nobody knew exactly why.

There'd still been food shortages, everything so expensive, none of the boys home yet, and a sort of dull,

miserable exhaustion. It had been a bitterly cold Christmas too, five inches of snow and frozen pipes, which later burst. The boarding house was cold too, of course, but there was nothing quite like the cold of home. Vicarages, Margot's mother said, had a special sort of cold to them; big, draughty old rooms, high ceilings, too many bedrooms, threadbare carpets and never enough money to light the fires.

This Christmas . . .

'When's Stephen coming?' she asked. 'Do you know?'

'Not till the twenty-third,' Jocelyn said.

'Does he still write to you? He doesn't to me.'

Jocelyn shook her head. 'Mummy hears from him now and then, I think. Not as often as she'd like.'

Margot didn't reply. She was fond of her brother. She didn't like to think that he was unhappy.

Jocelyn, watching her, said, 'Harry's home for Christmas.'

'I know,' said Margot. 'He wrote to me.'

'Oh!' Jocelyn's surprise was comical. 'Are you two writing? I thought . . .'

'No,' said Margot carefully. 'His mother cabled me in February when they found out he was alive, and then she wrote me a long letter when he got back to England. And he wrote when he got out of hospital. But I didn't write back. And then he sent me a letter

saying he was going to be here for Christmas and shouldn't we talk?'

'And what did you say?'

'I didn't. I haven't replied. I know! *I know!* But what could I say? *How* could I tell him about – about James, in a *letter*? Harry nearly died. He had pneumonia and exhaustion and heaven knows what else. His *mother* was probably reading his letters to him.'

'But after he got out . . .'

Margot was quiet. Then, 'I didn't know how to,' she said. 'I couldn't bear it if he . . . if . . .'

'But James was . . . well, he's as much Harry's child as yours, isn't he?' said Jocelyn.

'I know,' she said. 'But nobody thinks like that, do they? The girl is the one whose honour is defiled or whatever rot they spout. The boy is just being a boy. Father is practically a saint, and if even he doesn't think like that, I don't very well see how Harry is supposed to.'

She stood up abruptly, went across to her suitcase on the bed and began pulling out clothes. 'Gracious, this house is cold!' she said. 'I'm going to put on another petticoat.'

Jocelyn did not reply.

Father

Father.

Margot's father was a small, mild-mannered man, his hair thinning, his eyes blinking behind wire-rimmed spectacles. He looked like the sort of clergyman who spent his days chasing butterflies or writing monographs on Roman coins. In fact he was one of the hardest workers Margot had ever met.

His days were spent rushing from meeting to crisis to service to bedside. He was universally loved, both by the poor of his parish and the Churchy Ladies who called him *the poor dear vicar*, and worried about how tired he looked. He had been rather a distant figure in Margot's early childhood – her two gods had been Nana and Mother – but as she grew older she'd begun to wonder if perhaps they might have been good friends, the two of them. Her father spoke a lot of sense sometimes. She had grown up not thinking very much

about him, and now she was beginning to dimly feel what she had lost.

Because she *had* lost it. The business with James had buckled her family bonds out of shape entirely. Her mother wasn't just her mother any more, she was now also the mother of Margot's son, and their every interaction was weighed down by that knowledge. And her father . . .

She avoided her father whenever possible.

In a house where all the laundry was sent out by her mother, it had been impossible to hide her condition for long. Margot's knowledge of the facts of life had come from Stephen and a boy he'd brought home from school called Tucker, and nobody had mentioned that bleeding had anything to do with it. After two missed bleeds, it was her mother who had confronted her with the possibility of a baby. Her mother who had taken her to the doctor – not a local doctor, but a clinic in York. Her mother who had sat tight-lipped and furious through the consultation, then taken her back on the train and broken the news to Father.

Margot's memory of it was like vertigo, like a waking nightmare. *Oh no oh no oh no oh no*. Not this. Not now.

The look of shock on her father's face when he was told the news was one she would carry with her to the grave. He had not looked like that when War was

declared. When baby Charlotte had died. It was as though he had been attacked. As though the very bedrock of his family was crumbling. He had stared at her, and then he had said, 'My god, Margaret. How could you be so stupid?'

'I –' Margot had stammered. 'I – I didn't think—'

'That much is evident,' he said. He sat down, rubbed his hands over his face, and stared at her bleakly through his fingers.

'I'm sorry,' she said, and he shook his head.

'This is going to take some forgiving,' said her mother.

She could not remember making a decision about the baby and what to do about it. She had known, of course, that this could happen, but she had always assumed that Harry would be there. She had imagined cabling him the news, and Harry rushing back to marry her. Harry would not let her face this alone.

But Harry was missing in action. He'd been gone for a month now.

He was almost certainly dead.

'Perhaps we could both live here?' she had suggested rather feebly, and her parents' expressions had been a picture.

'I really don't think that would be best, dear,' her mother had said. Then, 'Don't you want a life for yourself? A partner, a family.'

And Margot had agreed that she did.

Oddly, nobody had suggested giving the baby up. Her father had worked with several orphanages in his long career, and he had said mildly, 'Not an orphanage, I don't think,' and Margot had said, 'No,' in relief.

It was only later, presumably after some private conversation between her parents, that Margot's mother had told them what the arrangement was to be.

It had all turned out to be surprisingly easy to manage. Nobody had been very shocked when she left school. Since the telegram about Harry and the realisation that she was in trouble, she had given up any pretence at school work. Her weeping fits and absences had been treated at first with sympathy – she wasn't the first pupil to lose someone in the War – but her mother's announcement that Margot was going to Durham for a secretarial course and a new start had been greeted with undisguised relief.

Nor had anyone raised any questions when her mother made it discreetly known that she was expecting again and going to a maternity home for the last three months of her lying-in. Her mother was in her forties after all, exhausted with the running of the household, and after what had happened with Charlotte . . . No, nobody was very surprised.

With the help of her stays – thank Heaven for

corsetry – Margot had kept her condition hidden until the beginning of the summer hols. Then they had left – her mother to stay with an aunt, and she to the mother and baby home with other similar unfortunates.

She could not remember being asked her permission. She supposed she could have refused, but then what would have been the alternative? The idea of supporting herself and a baby, alone, at seventeen, was impossible.

Her overwhelming feelings had been panic and shame, and the desperate, miserable sense of a nightmare from which she could not wake.

But somehow her father's reaction had been one of the worst memories of all. After that, she had avoided the vicar when she could and on occasions when they were in the same room, she spoke to him as little as possible. Her father was famous throughout the parish as a good Christian man. He forgave drunks and tramps and fallen women and the men who tried to steal the lead from the church roof.

But he couldn't forgive her.

The Impossibility of Writing a Simple Letter

The Vicarage
Church Lane
Thwaite
North Yorkshire
19 December 1919

Dear Harry,
Thank you for your letter. I am sorry I did not write before. I did not know what to say.

Margot stared at this for a while. Even to herself it looked feeble. She screwed it up and threw it into the waste-paper basket. Then she dipped her pen into the inkpot, and started again.

Dear Harry,

I would be very pleased to see you when you are home for Christmas. I was so pleased when I found out you weren't dead.

Now she sounded like an aunt congratulating him on passing the School Certificate. It didn't convey at all the mess she'd been in when the cable had arrived. And two *pleaseds* was poor style.

She screwed the letter up and hurled it into the basket. Then she dipped her nib into the inkpot again.

Dear Harry,

She stopped. What did she want to say to him exactly? If she couldn't be honest . . .

She would have to say something.

I am so sorry. I have behaved unforgivably.
I cannot tell you why in a letter.
I would be very glad to see you.

Was glad too indifferent? She remembered the love letters she had written him as a sixteen-year-old, and winced.

Please let me know when would be convenient.

Now she sounded as though she were arranging a visit from the sweep. But what else could she say? She *couldn't* gush.

She stared at the letter, then dipped her pen slowly in the inkpot for the last time.

Yours

Yours what?

Yours,
Margot.

There.

Harry

Harry Singer had arrived in Margot's life with an explosion when she was fifteen years old.

His mother had moved to the village with her children at the start of the summer – an exciting event at the best of times. His father was a general practitioner who had been forced out of retirement by the War and sent to a military hospital. The family home had been shut up and Harry's mother had moved the family to Thwaite.

Harry was a long, rangy boy in his late teens, with dark, floppy hair and a perpetual sense that he was about to grow out of whatever clothes you put him in. He wasn't exactly handsome, though he certainly wasn't ugly either. *Nice-looking*, her mother said, and that was perhaps closer to it. He had an *attractive* face. He was someone you could sit next to and be sure of having a good time. Someone who would talk about books, and

make your little sister a daisy-chain, and sub you an ice cream, and even talk to the most awful of Father's Churchy Ladies and look like he was enjoying himself. There was something about him . . . a confidence. A happiness. He was happy, in himself and in his place in the world. To Margot, who knew very few young men beyond Stephen's awkward schoolfriends and the boys from church, this was immediately appealing. Happiness. What a gift.

This was 1916, and the ranks of eligible young men were thinning. This was not so much down to the machine-gun as to the recruiting sergeant: anyone vaguely eligible over the age of eighteen had disappeared into the world of army camps and – in a few tantalising cases – actually overseas.

It had been love at first sight.

She'd been standing just inside the church door, helping her mother hand out the hymn books. And they'd walked through the door.

Harry's mother, dressed in fox-fur and an expression of tight-lipped anxiety. His sister Mabel, a gangly fourteen-year-old in a hideous magenta coat. Pricilla – Prissy – a little thing of twelve, all in pale peach. And then . . .

Harry. Her Harry.

She remembered the easy expression on his face as

he'd looked round the church. How he'd smiled, and how her friend Mary beside her had said "Oh!" so comically. And then – oh Hallelujah! – he'd looked up.

And seen her.

She remembered the almost comical jolt as he looked at her. It was a physical reaction – like the clown at the circus when he turns and sees the mess his fellows have made of the floor. It made her want to laugh out loud with happiness. That was how she remembered him. A simple bringer of joy.

Her father was shaking his mother's hand. The Churchy Ladies were twittering excitedly. Harry slipped behind Prissy and came up to her.

'Hullo,' she'd said, idiotically.

And he'd said, 'Hullo.'

And they'd both started to laugh.