
Opening Extract from...

The Heroes' Welcome

Written by Louisa Young

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Part One

1919

Chapter One

London, March 1919

Riley Purefoy did not think very much about the war. He didn't have to. It was part of him. If others mentioned it . . .

. . . but then they didn't: neither the other old soldiers, who had, most of them, realised very quickly that nobody wanted to hear what they might have to say, nor the civilians, who drifted away at the same rate as the soldiers fell silent.

Phrases and scraps, from time to time, slithered back at him. There was a taste in his throat sometimes, unidentified. There was an insistent image of bits of coughed-up gassed lung on the floor of an ambulance, which brought with it the necessity of standing still for a moment. There were moments still, a year and a half after he had stumbled off the battlefield, when the silence confused him as dry land confuses a sailor's legs. There was Peter Locke's voice, saying: 'Then you're in charge, old boy.' This last stuck with him, because he knew that however unlikely it seemed, this remained largely true. He was in charge.

Despite his physical damage, Riley was well equipped: a sturdy young man, clear-eyed. So as the months went by, when he did think

of war, he thought more of future war, and how to prevent it; of the future children, and how to keep them safe from it, or of the future of his fellow wounded, and how to improve it. He saw people look at him with pity and doubt. He registered the small (or large) involuntary gasps that his scarred face provoked. When a taxi driver drove off because he couldn't understand what Riley was saying, Riley did his best to conjure sympathy for the man's embarrassment over natural fucking anger at this continued humiliation.

He was quite aware that not many people thought he'd add up to much, poor fellow. But if he learnt anything from being shot to bits and patched up again, it was this: now is a good time to do what you want.

*

Riley Purefoy and Nadine Waveney married under a daftly beautiful wave of London blossom cresting over a city that had been at war for so long that it didn't know what to do with itself. On the wall of the register office a sign read: 'No Confetti – Defence of the Realm Act'. The flying blossom storm took no notice of that, dizzying eddies of it on the spring breeze, and mad sugar-pink drifts accumulating against the damp Chelsea kerbstones. Nadine, still so skinny she wasn't having her monthlies, wore Riley's vest under Julia Locke's utterly out-of-date wedding dress from before the war, taken in. Riley was in uniform. Peter Locke, Riley's former CO, tall, courteous and almost sober, was best man. Peter's cousin Rose was maid of honour, in white gloves, and his son Tom, flaxen-haired symbol of innocence and possibility, was the pageboy. No one else was there. Tom's mother, Julia, had picked early white lilac and given it to Rose to bring up from Locke Hill, but she didn't come herself. She was not well enough, or perhaps just embarrassed. It had only been a few months since her own crisis. It had only been a few months since everything.

Afterwards, they went to the pub across the road where, it turned out, Peter had earlier deposited two bottles of Krug '04, acquired he

didn't care to say how. Rose was in the dark green tweed suit that she'd worn to Peter and Julia's wedding (though she thought she wouldn't mention that), and confessed to a small thrill of shame to be in a pub. It was a beautiful ceremony and a happy day. Any fear that anyone might have had for the future of the marriage, its precipitous start, the battered souls of the bride and groom, lay unmentioned. It was a great time for not mentioning. No one wanted to remind anyone of anything. As though anyone had forgotten.

*

The bride and groom were to spend the wedding night at Peter's mother's house in Chester Square, where the tall handsome rooms were still draped with dustsheets and the chandeliers swathed in pale holland, because the old lady still didn't dare come down from Scotland.

They had not kissed. How could they? Through the long quiet winter of 1918–19 at Locke Hill, Nadine (so jumpy and tender, crop-headed) and he (damaged) had taken long walks with their arms around each other, spent long days curled up together on the chintz sofa, and failed over and over to go to bed at all, because they could not go to bed together, and did not want to part. They had paused, like bulbs underground in winter, immobilised, and reverted to a kind of reinvented virginity, as if their tumultuous romance had never been consummated during the unfettered years of war.

That the war was over, and things were to be different, was the largest truth in the house. The next was that nobody – apart from Rose – had much idea of what happened now. But for Riley and Nadine, one immediate shift was that the sexual liberties allowed by the possibility of imminent death had disappeared like a midsummer night's dream. Their reborn chastity happened passively and without comment between them. This had seemed to each of them at the time a form of safety, but by their wedding night Riley had become hideously aware of it, and also of the fact that he did not know what

his new wife was thinking on the subject. He recalled the letter she had sent him in 1915: 'Riley, don't you ever ever ever again not tell me what is going on with you . . .' But saintly woman though she was – in fact *because* of her saintliness – he could not – and he was aware of the irony here – find the words.

Riley brought with him to Chester Square various accoutrements: his etched brass drinking straw made from a shell casing, a gift from Jarvis at the Queen's Hospital Facial Injuries Unit; a rubber thing with a bulb, for squirting and rinsing; small sponges on sticks, for cleaning; mouthwashes of alcohol and peppermint. His pellets of morphine, carried with him in a little yellow tin which used to hold record-player needles, everywhere, always, just in case. *In case of what?* he thought. *In case someone shoots my jaw off again?*

Riley's mouth had for so long been the territory first of bloody destruction, then of its complex rebuilding by surgery and medical men, that he had trouble seeing it as his at all. Eating was still difficult, and took a long time. Trying to chew was difficult, trying to swallow, trying not to choke, trying not to dribble, even though he couldn't always tell that he was dribbling because his nerve endings could not be relied on to know where they were. Trying to cough, or stop coughing. Learning to live with somewhat undisciplined saliva and phlegm – though that had improved a lot, thank Christ – and to accept that even when he had learnt to live with it, other people would always find it disgusting. Learning to accept when Nadine passed him a handkerchief. Learning to accept endless generosity and inventiveness with soups and coddled eggs and milk puddings, fools and mousses and shape from Mrs Joyce, the cook: *baby food*, he'd thought, then *get over it,* and he was getting over it. He still did not care to eat with others. The embarrassment of some strangers, the inappropriate concern of others, Nadine's careful developed calmness, all exhausted him, but worse in its way was his own requirement of himself that he calmly ignore the food that started bit by bit to reappear as the privations of rationing faded away – fragrant Sunday joints, the clean crunchy salads, the chokable pies, the sweet smells of potatoes frying

in butter, chicken roasting, bread baking. At times he was afraid of his own breath, of stagnant saliva, of deadened unresponsive lips, of his medicalised mouth in the normal world. He would clean it fanatically; and he would lapse into silence, sometimes, for several days, knowing that speaking was exercising, and he should do it, as he should eat. At times, during the winter, after their reunion and before their wedding, he had not known what he had to offer her.

The rooms at Chester Square were graceful and quiet. Rose, tall kind Rose who had nursed him at the Queen's, had set up a decanter of whisky and some cold supper in the drawing room.

'Have a sandwich,' he said to Nadine. *Egg and cress*, he thought. *Rose made them specially because they're soft.* He knew it was courtesy and affection, but in his longing for normality he couldn't help feeling it as controlling, as singling him out . . . *Oh it's not the kindness of Rose's response that singles you out, Riley. It's the damage itself.* He was so grateful. He was getting tired of being grateful. But he was grateful.

Nadine, perched on the corner of a sofa half unfurled from its covering, took a little white triangle. He knew she didn't like eating in front of him either, though he pretended he didn't, hoping that she would get over it. It was another thing he had to be gracious about. They each drank a little whisky, and were silent. He was terribly happy. Look at her! With her yellow eyes and her sideways smile. But—

It is our wedding night. But—

He couldn't – didn't want to – put it into words. Oh the irony! If he could speak clearly, there would be no need to say anything! *If my mouth was normal, I wouldn't have to speak, I could just . . . act . . .* He looked at her, and in his mind his look became a caress, a touch, an invitation, a demand . . . how could he follow up such a look? How could she respond to it? He looked away.

Nadine, as nervous as him, stood suddenly, and said, 'Well!' cheerfully, smiled at him, and started for the door. He stood too, wondering whether he would follow, or wait. He didn't know. He went out into the hall and as she reached the landing she looked back at him, and said, briskly, 'It doesn't matter, you know.'

He, who knew her so well, did not know what she meant by it. *It doesn't matter? Of course it bloody matters.*

She was off, almost scurrying, into the bedroom. So he went up, and stood in the doorway. She was further round, out of view, putting on a nightgown – a new one.

Then he was in the bathroom, trying to clean his mouth without disgusting illustrative noise, and his thoughts flooded in: *We should have talked of it. I should have kissed her before this. I should have prepared – myself – her . . .* But how could he kiss her? He had tried it out, on his own arm, like a youth. His lips had lain there, incompetent. He could not kiss her – not her mouth, her breast, nor any part of her. He could remember kissing her. It tormented him.

When he came back she was in bed, so he undressed. The previous times – before, during the war – they had blushed and fumbled and laughed and burned up and torn each other's clothes off: the first time, in the field; the miraculous interlude in Victoria. He had never seen her in a nightgown before, in bed. His wife. Safe and sweet. Her hair had grown back a little over the winter, the wild dark curls starting to coil again. She'd brushed it.

She was smiling up at him – nervously? He didn't want to make her nervous.

It was pretty clear to him that she couldn't want him that way. Damaged as he was. How could she?

*

She was thinking: *Why did I say that, on the landing? 'It doesn't matter?' What doesn't matter?*

She'd felt foolish even before the words came out. She thought: *I'm sure he would want me, if he was physically, um . . .* She was thinking: *I must not pressurise him . . . but he hasn't – since – and he's had so much morphine, over the past years . . .* She didn't know, actually, if he was still taking it. There were areas of his life where his independence and his privacy were so important to him, *which was*

quite right. Quite right. She had been watching him, cautiously. He did not seem to see himself as a patient, or a cripple, and she was not going to tell him that he was. She didn't know if he was or not. Even if she had an opinion, it was not her decision.

She had been thinking about this moment for weeks. Something would change, now they were married. The most important thing (which she had borne in mind all winter, and was, she felt, doing well at integrating) was that, specially as she *had* been a nurse, she absolutely must not become *his* nurse. But this vital consideration made it difficult for her to, for example, enquire about whether the morphine had affected his . . . Hm.

To be blunt . . .

She didn't know if he would be physically capable. She didn't know how to ask. Or if she wanted to ask. She hadn't wanted to spoil anything by asking. They had always been so magically immediate with each other, understanding, catching eyes. Since they were children they'd had that! Apart from the one great stupid error, his attack of spurious honour, of over-gentlemanliness, when he'd told her he had a girl in France, when in fact there was no girl, it was that he hadn't wanted to inflict his wounds on her – oh, Lord, the kindness he had meant by that, and the *arrogance* . . . Apart from that, *that little thing*, they'd never really had to ask, or explain, about anything. She didn't want to ask now. She wanted the romantic. She wanted them to be magical, not to have to ask or explain. They *had* to be romantic. Because if they weren't romantic, what were they? She was aware how their union could be seen. She was damned if she was going to be seen as his nurse, and him as some pathetic, incapacitated . . .

Stop it. Nobody thinks that. And who cares if they do?

And a woman is not meant to want it anyway . . .

Yes, but I'm not that kind of squashed, repressed Victorian woman – and I bet they did want it, they just didn't dare say . . .

And . . .

He came back in his pyjama bottoms. His face, so extraordinary.

His mouth. The beautiful upper lip, the battlefield below. The skin above smoothed ivory by morphine, the scars below carefully shaven, not hidden, not displayed, only the moustache worn a little long, like the hair of his head, so as not to frighten people too much. His beautiful grey eyes. Twenty-three years old, looking a hundred. She watched his arm reaching in the shadow to turn out the lamp: the long scar from the Somme streaked across the muscle, shining. The glow from the streetlight outside fell on his strong back, the shape of his shoulders, the curve of his spine. He reached for his pyjama top and she said, 'Don't.' And saw him misunderstand it.

He pulled it up over his shoulders.

'No,' she said. 'I didn't mean . . .' and as he came to lie by her she slid her arms inside the shirt, and he sighed.

*

And one thin layer of tension flew off him – but . . .

But what about my mouth? he thought. *I don't . . . She can't . . .*

They didn't kiss. They lay entwined on the cool sheet. Awake. Unconsummated.

She doesn't want it, he thought. *I mustn't.*

*

He's not . . . He can't, she thought. *And I can't—*

Well.

If that's it . . .

I must respect that.

*

The proximity of flesh was irresistible. Riley bit his tongue, natural upper teeth to false lower, and rolled over, so his back was to her, so she would not notice.

Oh, she thought.

After quite a long time, they went to sleep.

*

The day after the wedding, they went to Nadine's parents' house on Bayswater Road. She had not been home since the end of the war. Not for Christmas. Not at all. She had written bland letters to her mother saying she was all right, and less bland ones to her father saying she would come soon, but the fog of shock and exhaustion in which they had been dwelling at that time had prevented her from properly recognising the cruelty of staying away. Neither she nor Riley had even told their parents where they were living. It had been part of the silent arrangement. Nothing, till spring. Just a suspension between past and present which allowed them to attend to neither.

They stood on the steps in the front garden, their backs to Kensington Gardens, the door shiny before them, and each gave the other a brave look as Riley rang the bell. Nadine took Riley's hand, and he felt the flow of feeling shared and supported by the physical union: two bodies stronger than one, two hearts more capacious. Being – becoming – more than the sum of their parts.

A maid answered, and he wondered what had become of Barnes: *perhaps he joined up after all. Perhaps he got killed. Or perhaps he got that guesthouse with Mrs Barnes. Let's hope so. It's been six months since the end.*

Lady Waveney was home, and Sir Robert too, the maid said, Who could she say was calling?

'I'm Nadine,' said Nadine, and the girl blinked, and said: 'Oh! She's in there, Miss . . .', and stared: the prodigal daughter returning, and with a wounded officer . . .

Riley knew the look, and what it meant: *Oh my word, oh poor thing, such nice eyes, and it's not right to stare, but how can she bear him?* He didn't stare back at the maid. And when he and his bride went into the beautiful, unchanged, unforgotten drawing room, all velvets and

spring light and rather good paintings, he allowed his new mother-in-law a few moments, too, to look at his face, before he looked up at hers. His determination and habit was to wear his scars without apology but with kindness. The last time they had met (Jacqueline, Lady Waveney, what was he meant to call her?), he had had only his scar from Loos, the little dashing cut on his cheekbone, the clean, romantic, officer-in-a-duel-of-honour scar. So he would be a shock, with his reconstructed jaw, his twisted mouth, his slightly too-long hair lying only slightly effectively over the scars where the skin flaps had been taken from his scalp and brought down to cover his new chin. He was beginning to realise that he did not know what he looked like to anyone else. People said his surgeon, Major Gillies, had done a good job, and Major Gillies himself said it had healed well, and Riley chose to believe this was true. It would have been unhelpful to do otherwise. However. He had learnt that he had to be patient, and allow everyone who saw him their own response, and if necessary lead them through their shock and doubt to the fact that he had accepted his lot. This despite the fact that his speech was not entirely clear. Oh, and he had to let them understand that unclear speech did not equate to an unclear mind. This too was turning out to be part of his responsibility, every time he spoke to someone new. Or, indeed, someone from before. He hadn't on the whole been meeting new people.

Jacqueline, wearing a luxurious old-fashioned kind of house-gown, her red hair piled up, was doing something with a plant by the long window at the back of the drawing room. She turned, and blinked three times. Once to see her daughter. Once to see her with Riley Purefoy. Once to see Riley Purefoy's face. Then she lifted her hands – to open her arms? For an embrace? Riley couldn't tell. It turned somehow into a shrug, which was visibly not what she had meant. She put down her secateurs.

'Oh my dear,' she said. 'Oh my dear.'

'Hello, Mother,' said Nadine.

Neither of them advanced across the blocked-out distance between them. They seemed to him to be suspended. So he stepped forward,

held out his hand to Jacqueline, and said, in his odd, quiet, bold voice, mangled a little through the straitened mouth: 'Lady Waveney – I am pleased to see you. You look well.'

'Captain Purefoy,' she said, nothing more than another blink betraying any response. He was impressed.

'Mr, I think, by now,' he said.

'Oh no,' she said, with a little passion in her voice. 'Always Captain. Always. Will you have tea?'

'Thank you, Mother,' said Nadine. 'We will.'

The 'we' stopped Jacqueline in her movement towards the bell. She turned, looked, saw: gold ring.

'Is Sir Robert at home?' Riley said gently. 'I need to speak to him. I have left it rather late already . . .'

'So you have,' said Jacqueline. She raised her eyes to stare at him, at her daughter, at him again. No one dropped from anyone else's look.

'Well, I . . .' said Jacqueline.

Riley observed: Jacqueline covering shock with bred-in-the-bone manners, the calmly beautiful half-smile she wore whenever she didn't know what to do. Nadine, still in her mother's presence feeling thirteen years old, naughty, resentful and blank. He saw the careful breath with which Nadine prepared to start the speech she had for her mother.

'I'll just call your father,' Jacqueline interrupted, undercutting her daughter at just the most effective moment. She crossed to ring the bell. The maid, standing agog in the hall, stepped into the room. 'Call Sir Robert, Mary.'

And Nadine instead burst out: 'I do hope, Mother, that you're not going to make some stupid fuss about this, because it's done, it's right, and with or without your blessing Riley and I are—'

My brave fighting girl, he thought.

'Oh no,' said Jacqueline faintly. 'My dear. No.'

Nadine fell silent. Her mother looked, in a way, as if she was thinking about something else entirely. Silence drifted round the lovely room; the pale panelling, the dark velvets, the sea colours, the windows full of leaves and light.

What does she mean by that? No, what?

'So, have we your blessing?' Riley asked, cautiously. He was fairly sure that was not what she had meant.

Jacqueline looked up. 'I invited you in here, Riley, all those years ago. Me. I thought you were sweet. I thought you needed drying off and feeding, and you responded, and look at you now. Look what you have made of being knocked into the Round Pond.'

He said nothing. It was not clear whether this was sneering or admiration. Or both.

'You are an astonishing boy.'

He hadn't been called a boy in a long time. *Ah – it makes her feel better about me. As if I'm not a man, and I haven't – ah—*

Well, madam, you're closer than you know.

Sir Robert came down the stairs: a clattering, hurrying step, and a figure at the door.

'What's going on, my dear?' he said, before he saw: and when he did the joy in his face was heart-melting, immediate, irresistible. There was no difficulty here. Riley wondered how much it hurt Jacqueline to see the bare-faced love Nadine gave her father, running to him, burying herself in him, visibly radiating the joy she took in the fatherly smell of him; his inky fingers, greyer hair, familiar voice. He held her away to look at her, held her back to his chest to embrace her, held her away again to admire her – and noticed Riley.

'Purefoy!' he exclaimed. 'You cuckoo! Where've you been? Good Lord – excuse me, darling – my word.' He stared, for a moment only, at the face, then gave a tiny sigh and a shake of the head. 'Well, Purefoy—' he said, and he strode over, attempted to shake hands, and couldn't stop himself from embracing.

'It seems—' said Jacqueline, with a slightly twisted smile, but Riley broke in and said: 'Might I have a word with you, sir? In private?' So little had been correctly done. He *would* do it correctly. As far as possible.

Sir Robert couldn't make out what Riley was saying. Riley repeated it.

'Modern world, Purefoy,' said Sir Robert, getting the words, but not the purpose of them. 'No secrets here . . .' But he sensed there was something, so he allowed himself to be manoeuvred out of the room, into the hall. The maid skittered from under their feet, and there they foundered for a moment. Riley did not know where to go. The library, he felt, from novels, was the correct location. There was no library.

'What is it?' Sir Robert said. 'What's on your mind that the ladies can't hear?'

Riley grinned his sideways grin. No excuses. No avoidance. No modifying his vocabulary even. *Get it done.*

He wanted to say that he had a *post facto* request, but he knew he would not be able to get it out clearly.

'The horse has bolted, sir,' he said. 'I. I. I. Wanted to ask.'

This was hard. *All right. Pretend he's a senior officer. All right*. Robert was looking curious, and civil.

'For Nadine's hand. To marry her, sir. But. We're married already.' Pause. *All right. Off we go. Long sentence coming up.* 'Yesterday, sir, without your permission, because if anything had prevented our marrying now, we might not have been able to bear it, sir.'

Sir Robert was concentrating to make out the words, and utterly taken aback – silent – and then: 'You cheeky little . . .' he said. 'You – it's not even wartime! Explain yourself, man. Does Jacqueline know about this?'

'Only just,' said Riley.

Sir Robert stared at him. 'Oh, good God,' he said. 'What on earth? What am I meant to – have you any money?' he said. 'To marry on?'

'No, sir.'

'Prospects?'

'Far from it, sir, as you know.'

'Dependants?'

'I hope to have, in due course.'

'And, er, this?' Robert gestured to Riley's face. 'What about this? I mean – oh, good God.' The ramifications were filtering through. Wounded, disfigured, penniless, war hero, *fait accompli*, cheeky sod,

bright though, common as muck, his family – good people though, decent working people – and that face, that voice. Oh, good God. What a bloody cocktail.

'She doesn't mind it, sir. So I can hardly complain.'

'Passchendaele, wasn't it?' Robert said.

'Yes, sir.'

Silence.

'Hmm.'

What a bloody cocktail.

'So what are you doing with yourself? What are you going to do?'

'Thinking of Parliament, sir.'

'What!'

'The Labour Party, sir.'

'Are you a Communist, Purefoy?'

An echo of someone else asking him that years ago passed through his mind . . . *Peter. That dugout on the Salient, a conversation about music, the first human look you'd had in months – 1916?*

'No sir,' Riley said. 'But I've become attached to notions of peace and justice. I believe they're worth working for.'

'Good Lord – you didn't stand, did you?'

'The election came a bit quick.'

'Good God.'

Riley stared at him, waiting. Calm, strong.

Sir Robert stared back, ran a hand over his face, and then said: 'Let's join the ladies, shall we?'

They could all see by Jacqueline's still, polite expression, that she was too surprised to know what to think.

'Riley,' Sir Robert said. 'Nadine. You leave us no choice. We are not the kind of people who turn their daughter away – as you should bloody well know – sorry, darling.'

Relief?

He continued: 'Though you could've given us the chance to, well, discuss it, and demonstrate our . . . spontaneously, if you see what I mean . . . so we could give our blessing in a more organised fashion . . .'

'We didn't choose,' Nadine said gently. 'We had no choice. It was a fact . . .'

'I dare say,' her father said. 'Of course. And so . . .'

Jacqueline was staring. 'Don't you dare,' she interrupted. 'Robert? This is outrageous.'

'Well . . .' he was saying, and Riley could almost see the cold drifting down through Nadine's limbs.

'Outrageous,' said Jacqueline. 'Unforgivable.'

Riley dipped his head, and took Nadine's arm into his.

Robert glanced from him to Jacqueline and back. 'Oh,' he said. Nadine was frozen.

'I'm sorry,' said Robert.

'*They* should be sorry,' Jacqueline said. 'Well – they will be, won't they? A silly girl and a boy who doesn't know his place. How ridiculous.'

Riley saw his new mother-in-law's short breath, and the high triangles of pink on her cheeks. Somewhere, he felt pity and it warmed him through the horrible little silence that sat on the room. Silence can mean so many things. His arm was firm under Nadine's hand as she let go of it.

'Well, never mind. Goodbye, Daddy,' she said, and leant in to give him a kiss. 'Goodbye, Mother' – from a safe distance. 'Don't worry. As the war's over, we'll probably all survive long enough for you to indulge your little fit of pique.'

'Darling girl,' Robert said.

'We'll see you soon,' she said, and blew him a kiss on the end of her finger.

Riley watched her: *My lovely, beautiful fighting girl.*

As soon as they were out of the house she took Riley's arm again, and held on to it.

'You up for the next round?' he asked, and she nodded tightly as they walked.

*

Walking up the street towards Paddington, his family, his childhood, a cloudy shame rose in Riley. Yes, he had every excuse under the sun, but he had neglected them. One afternoon in 1917 his mother had burst into the ward and not recognised him and shrieked and collapsed at the sight of his fellow patients; just before Christmas last year he had arrived out of the blue and stayed for fifteen minutes. Other than that, he had not seen any of them. *You could have handled it better*, said one little voice; *you did your best,* said another. Anyway. Now was the time for putting things right.

Up towards the canal, they turned into the little terrace of little houses.

As they came up to the door he could see his mother from the street, scrubbing the inside of the front windows with newspaper. She would have dipped it in vinegar. He remembered the smell. She did it every week; so near the station, things got dirty quickly. A figure moved behind her: Dad.

Riley squeezed Nadine's hand, and knocked.

A moment or two passed before Bethan opened it. He knew she had been hiding the newspaper wads and taking off her apron.

'Hello Mum,' he said, apologetically, and she squeaked, and put her hand to her mouth, and called, 'John! John!' And his father came, and dragged him in, and he said: 'Dad – Mum—' and though his plan had been just to blurt it out, quick and straight, he found he couldn't speak at all, so he sat at the kitchen table, and Bethan put the kettle on the hob, and John came through, and looked at him, and patted his shoulders, and said, 'My boy.'

'There's a woman outside in the street, just standing,' announced a girl, popping round the kitchen door – and, seeing the man at the table: 'Oh my word, what's this?'

Riley looked up. Looked down again. Looked up, and laughed. Wispy, pert, blonde, mouthy.

'Elen?' he said.

Her face went very wobbly.

'You look exactly the same,' he said.

'Well you don't,' she said. 'What the hell happened to you?'

'Kaiser Bill stole my jawbone,' he said, and stood, and smiled, but she pushed past him saying: 'Excuse me. Four-and-a-half years, Riley. Four-and-a-half years and . . . three postcards . . . and a promise of a teddy bear. The war ended last November, or didn't you notice?'

'Elen,' said John. 'Mind your lip.'

'I'm right though, ain't I?' she said. 'It's not fair on Mum. Well I suppose I'm glad you're back. You *are* back? Merry! Merry?'

Merry was in the doorway, staring. The little room was already crowded now. *How am I going to fit Nadine in here?* Merry was darker, heavier built, more guarded. She stared at him.

'Here's Riley!' said Bethan, encouragingly. They were all in a sudden parabola of cross-currents. So many emotions. Riley felt unsteady. He should have written. It wasn't fair on them. Sunday afternoon.

'How do you do,' said Merry, and Riley flinched. She'd been eight when he left. Both girls were looking at his scars.

'Yeah, Mum said your jaw was blown off,' said Elen brutally. 'That a new one, then?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Fancy,' said Elen.

'Make the tea, Elen,' said John. 'You all right with tea, son?'

Riley took his brass straw from his pocket, and twirled it sadly at his father. Merry stared at it.

Elen poured the boiling water, and plonked the pot on the table. 'Well, thanks for turning up, Riley. I'm back off now, Mum. See you next Sunday, same as usual.'

'Elen,' said Riley and Bethan.

Elen's mouth was white as she swept past. Merry hopped out of her way.

'Elen,' Riley said again, and turned to follow her. Bethan put her hand on his arm. They both heard Elen say, at the front door, 'You might as well go in. I don't know why he's bothering to be tactful.'

Merry was still staring when Nadine appeared in the kitchen doorway, and said, 'Hello,' quietly.

'Miss Nadine!' cried Bethan, and John shot Riley a look, and Riley took a big breath before stepping to her side, past the chair and the coal scuttle and Merry. *Quick to the kill, quick to the kill.*

'Mum,' he said. 'Dad. Nadine and I are married.'

It was Merry's face his eyes landed on. Big tears were on her young cheeks.

'Oh, Merry,' he said. 'Oh, Merry.'

Silence drifted, pulled and swung between them all. Then Bethan said: 'We would have liked to have been informed.'

John held his hand out to Nadine. 'Married,' he said. 'You married our boy? Well. Well. Good for you, Miss.'

'I know it's all odd,' Nadine said. 'Please call me Nadine. I think that will make it less odd. Please.'

Bethan gave a kind of roll back on her heels, a surveying look with a chin lift, which said, 'so that's how it's going to be'.

'It's all right, Ma,' Riley said. 'We were afraid of a fuss. That's all. We didn't even want a wedding. We just wanted to be married.'

'All your worldly goods, eh, Miss?' said Bethan. 'There's nice.'

'I don't have much,' said Nadine, and got a withering look.

'Who's going to wear the trousers, if you're to be a kept man, Riley?'

'Mum!'

'Wounded hero only lasts so long. What about when you're just a sick, ugly man with no money? Where are you going to find a job to keep her? No offence, Miss Nadine, and I've always liked you well enough.'

'None taken, Mrs Purefoy,' said Nadine, mortified. 'I like you well enough too. Riley, should we give them a little time to get used to it, perhaps?'

Bethan was grinning. Riley saw her waiting for him to agree to Nadine's suggestion. *She has cast it now that any time I agree with my wife, I am less than a man. And any time I disagree with my wife, she can say, 'I told you so.'*

'Mum,' he said. 'Don't be foolish over this. Had to happen one day, eh? Dad?'

'Come round for Sunday lunch next week,' John said. 'They'll calm down. Congratulations, son.'

Riley thanked him. It was all so quick.

Merry was still crying. Riley said to her: 'I'm sorry for being such a bad brother. I'll be a better one.'

Merry said: 'Are you my brother?'

*

They crossed into Kensington Gardens, holding hands, walking into the green. Up the Broad Walk, beyond the Orangery, the pleated new leaves of the arcaded hornbeams gleamed in the sunlight like Venetian glass. Through the observation windows in the hedge they caught sight of the Sunken Garden, terracing down geometrically, with its long pond and lead planters.

'Our mothers are afraid for us,' he said. 'That's all.' He could understand the fear without feeling any obligation either to adopt it himself, or to try to make the situation more acceptable to them.

Nadine said: 'If they haven't the sense and courage to look at us and give us every bit of loving support in the world, then they can go to the devil.' She glanced up, as if to check. 'I shall feel nothing but relief,' she said, 'that I don't have to deal with them.' She was wearing that green wool dress of Julia's, too hot for the day, but she had been living in uniform for so long she had no clothes of her own, and during the long, quiet hibernation at Locke Hill, she had made none nor bought any. With Julia still hardly leaving her bedroom it made sense for Nadine to borrow her clothes. She was still wearing the high lace-up boots, and the cap. Riley had a surging feeling of freedom at the idea that she might now acquire some clothes. He wanted to kiss her. *Will my desire for her fade?* he wondered. *How long am I to live with this?*

They stayed in the gardens late, wandering, sitting on benches, talking mildly.

The irony was that what Jacqueline and Bethan were scared of was

true. The surface of society had been blown around by the war, but had the architecture changed? Were things going to be different now? Where would a Riley, married to a Nadine, fit in? If Nadine were straightforwardly posh, and he straightforwardly a working man, might it be simpler – if only simply more impossible? *But she is half-foreign and artistic*, he thought, *and I am a semi-educated semi-adopted cuckoo in the nest. And my face reminds everyone every moment of what I have given for them, and of what they want to forget about now. And don't we all . . .*

They had arranged for two rooms in Chelsea, and they would work. They had considered education: they both half felt they wanted more of it, and concluded that at twenty-three they were too old, and then doubted their conclusion. Certainly, no one was 'going back' to anything. They weren't mourning some pre-war Utopia, the golden years before the *Titanic* sank and Captain Scott died on the ice and the Empire and Ireland started to bite back. For Riley and for Nadine, looking back would involve unbearable regret about what might have been. Unbearable. So there was nothing to go back to.

And the war was still over.

Nadine said, as they wandered over to the Round Pond: 'We'll have to take ourselves outside all that and create our own new world. Chelsea will be the start . . .'

She said, as well, 'You seem to feel you need to justify your existence, but you don't.' And he replied: 'Yes, I do. I don't know why, but I do.'

And she said: 'Take your time. We have time now . . .'

'I don't want to take time. I want – I want—!' He'd been stuck for too long, resting, recovering, receiving, disengaged. 'We're not going to be living off your parents, at twenty-four. I'll be doing something.'

'It does seem ridiculous that just because your wound is in your head, you get no pension for it . . .' she said. 'When if it had been a toe, even—' She stopped. They'd said this before. It annoyed him. And it was his territory.

'It makes sense,' he said. 'They only needed our bodies to follow

orders. They didn't value our heads then; why should they value them now?'

She laughed.

By the time the keeper called for closing, the damp, growing, evening smell of the park was rising around them: moss, tubers, lilac, hyacinths. At Locke Hill, during the half-paralysed, shattered, Rip-Van-Winkled winter, Nadine had marked the days of emergence from hibernation by drawing each flower as it appeared from black earth and mossy branches, marking the way to spring: snowdrops, aconites, crocuses, scylla, stars of Bethlehem, grape hyacinths, daffodils; camellias, almond blossom, cherry blossom, pear and apple blossom. Harker, the silent, ancient gardener, would quietly nudge her towards each new arrival. It seemed like progress, of a sort.

They were restless. The marriage rooted them to each other, but everything else was still nebulous and reverberating.

'Perhaps our brains are still shaking,' she said. 'I still feel jumpy. It's too soon to settle.'

'I've heard that it takes as long to get over something as you spent in the something you're trying to get over,' he said. 'Makes a kind of sense.'

She smiled at his beautiful face. 'That's good,' she said. 'So we've got till, say, 1923. Barring future crises.'

'1923! Where will we be then?'

'One thing at a time,' she said. 'Honeymoon first.'

Honeymoon.

*

And that night, rattling in the separate couchettes, which gave an excuse for not thinking about *that*, for the moment, on the train to Paris, he couldn't stop thinking about decisions, and the future, about how strange it was to be able to think about those things. There was going to be a future. He looked towards it, consciously, turning his mind away from the past the way a car's lamps turn at a junction:

illuminating possibilities, the road ahead, with beams of light that do not, cannot, show everything. As the car turns the lights are only ever shining straight on, out over – what? Another path, a path you won't take and can't know, that you glimpse in passing. It's the future, it's forward, but what forward entails, you can't know. It's shocking enough for now, after those years of orders and terror and imminent death, that forward even exists. He and Nadine had a forward to go into. They had choices. They had decisions to make. They had a degree of power. It was quite peculiar.

He was hideously aware of her, lying beneath him, separated by the padded wooden shelf he lay on, rattled and thrown around by the train.