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Exposure

Written by Helen Dunmore

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Exposure

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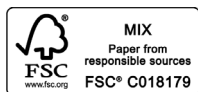
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Prologue

It isn't what you know or don't know: it's what you allow yourself to know. I understand this now. I'm on my way home, in a second-class smoker from Victoria. I stare out over the network of roofs, shining with rain. The train wheels click into a canter. I have to change on to the branch line at Ashford, but that's a long way yet.

It turns out that I knew everything. All the facts were in my head and always had been. I ignored them, because it was easier. I didn't want to make connections. I've begun to understand that I've been half-asleep all my life, and now I'm waking up. Or perhaps I'm kidding myself, and it's like one of those nightmares where you push your way up through sticky layers of consciousness and think you've woken. You sweat with relief because it's over. You're back in the waking world. And then, out of the corner of your eye, you see *them* coming.

I dream that I'm back at Stopstone. It's night, and I'm huddled in bed. At last I manage to tip myself over

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the border into sleep, and it's then that my door bursts open and my brothers crash into the room. They pull the bedclothes off me. They don't need to tell me not to cry out. One grabs my feet and the other grips me under the shoulders, drags me half off the bed and then lets go and takes hold of my wrists instead. They swing me and my shoulders burn. I'm afraid they will pull my arms out of their sockets. I can smell the sweat of them. It's stinky, like grown-up sweat. They lug me to the window. I see that the sash is right up and I don't know how they did that. They push and shove until they have bundled me on to the sill. Now they are each holding one of my arms. The terrace is below me, two floors down. They will drop me and tell everyone that I was sleepwalking. They say nothing but they work together. There is a push in my back and I scrape over the sill and dangle from my brothers' hands. Now I hear them counting: 'Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two . . . ?'

Soon it will be over. Perhaps I will fly. Perhaps they will let go of me and I will fly over the grass and the dark trees and the lake and they will never see me again. But my animal breath pants out of me and urine trickles down my leg.

' . . . *one* . . . ?' They shake me, as if they want to shake me wide-awake in case I miss any of what they are doing to me. Perhaps they want me to cry out now, but I can't.

'BLAST-OFF!'

* * *

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I never went beyond that in my dreams. I woke in my cell.

I never spoke about it to anyone but Giles. I opened myself to him. I don't even know whether I trusted him or not. The word didn't apply. There was nothing Giles didn't know about me. Nothing in me that he couldn't touch.

I'm not sure about love. What it is, and what it means. But now I think that nobody is sure. Instead, we conspire to convince one another. That winter afternoon in my digs on the Madingley Road. Giles was sitting on my bed, reading. Every so often he would turn to me. He didn't smile. He would take me in, and then he would go back to his book. I was sure then.

Once the train reaches Ashford, I have to change on to the branch line. There is a little train to the coast. There are any number of stops before it reaches the last one. East Knigge. Lily, and the children.

I've got some time yet. I tell myself I'm going home, although I've never seen the place before.

I

The Whistle Blows

November, 1960

It starts with the whistle of a train, shearing through the cold, thick dusk of a November afternoon. Lily Callington hears it as she digs over her vegetable patch at the bottom of her garden in Muswell Hill. For a second she's startled, because the whistle sounds so close, as if a train is rushing towards her along the disused railway line at the bottom of the garden. She straightens and listens intently, frowning. The whistle goes through her, touching nerves so deep that Lily doesn't even know where they are. The children! They aren't here. She can't see them, touch them, keep them safe—

Stop it, you fool. They are not babies any more. Paul is ten, Sally almost nine. Even Bridget is five. They're at school. What could be safer than a primary school in Muswell Hill? She'll walk down there for three-thirty, and wait in the Infants' playground with the other

mothers until the little ones spill out of the doorway. Always, there's a half-second when the appearance of Bridget startles her, as if the daughter in her head doesn't quite match the boisterous schoolchild whom her teacher calls 'a chatterbox'. Lily wants to kneel down and open her arms for Bridget to hurtle into them. She wants to fold herself around the sturdy little body. Of course, she never does. She smiles, and waves, like the other mothers. She smoothes Bridget's dark curls, and asks if she has remembered her PE bag.

They're not babies. She, Lily, is a married woman in her thirties with a house and a job. Her feet are planted in safely mortgaged earth. Lily smiles at herself, a little derisively, as the wind shifts and the noise of the train whistle is carried out of hearing. The train is far away now. She puts her right foot on the shaft of the fork, jiggles the handle slightly and eases the tines deep into heavy clay. Her heart steadies. You should drink less coffee, she tells herself. All those years and still the old panic blazing up in her veins. She looks down at the clods of London clay that cling to the fork. There's three-quarters of the patch left to do, and she likes digging. The soil must be opened up for the winter frosts to work on it. You are standing on your own patch of earth. Your name is Lily Callington. You are in England now.

Giles Holloway hears the train whistle too, as he mooches through Finsbury Park. He's close to the main line and the sound is clear. There it goes, getting up speed for the race to the north.

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Giles wears a midnight-blue overcoat which might have been elegant on a more elegant figure, but even the skill of his tailor hasn't been able to overcome Giles's crude bulk of chest, shoulder and belly. In these streets, he and his coat draw second glances. He might be a landlord, in search of a couple more houses to cram with Irish labourers. Giles hears the train whistle, and to him it says, as it always does: *Elsewhere*. He knows exactly which train he will catch, if ever he needs to disappear. He won't go anywhere near the Channel ports. King's Cross to Newcastle, and then the ferry to Bergen.

Everything that surrounds him is provisional. It won't and can't last: history has already decided that. But it's decades since Giles was introduced to that way of thinking, and, like his overcoat, the cover of such thoughts doesn't quite fit over the weight of what life has done to him – or, to be fair, what he's done to life. From time to time, he stubs his mind against the solidity of this world that history has *decided against*, as they used to say in secret, smoky, ardent meetings all those years ago. They were so certain then. Nothing had touched them. What they believed was as fresh as a sheet of paper with nothing written on it. Fascism must be defeated, and be replaced by a new and better world.

Of course they had no illusions. They understood that omelettes couldn't be made without breaking eggs. Sacrifice – even the sacrifice of others – was heroic, correctly understood. How they struggled for the correct viewpoint, overcoming the handicap of their class origins and bourgeois culture. Actions that appeared

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grubby, even furtive, would be revealed in all their clarity once history had swept away the debris of capitalism. For the time being, there must be secrecy. Concealment was an art you had to learn, and then you saw it everywhere, although you'd never suspected its existence until you began to be part of it. Giles remembers Julian Clowde's rather cold, self-satisfied smile as he took stock of Giles and made him understand what was what.

It was passionately exciting, but you never showed it. An inner ring within an inner ring. If you didn't know that the inner ring was there, you saw nothing. It was there in plain sight, but camouflaged. You saw a group of friends on the summer grass by the river, laughing, and you passed on with a quick, ignoble pang because you were not one of them. You had to be beckoned in. Initiated. Julian had beckoned him in. Julian had watched Giles, got to know him, tested him as you test an inner tube in a bowl of water to see where the puncture is. Giles had had a lot to learn. First of all, he had to learn to become silent about his opinions. He became humorous about his young self and its ludicrous pronouncements on politics. Now he'd grown up and seen the world as it was. He knew that others were doing the same, and that they wouldn't necessarily even recognise one another for what they were. They had learned everything about concealment in the open.

Julian smoothed Giles's way, and Giles glided into place. Lunches were had in quiet clubs, overtures were

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made and accepted, and there you were, old boy, lodged in position, vouched for by men who had the ear of everyone who mattered. *Have you come across Giles Holloway? I'd like you to meet him.*

There you were, and no one knew what you were. Giles was a pirate then, flying his own flag under the very bows of the great ship of state. He'd always rather fancied that notion. And then there was the war.

Nineteen forty-seven. Back to London. Back to the Admiralty and back under Julian's wing. Older now, though. The years were going by. On it all went: those documents, those damned dingy documents, on and on. The sails of Giles's little ship hung limp.

Here he is still, after all those years. On goes the world, blithe and satisfied with itself. London is more grey and massive than ever, and it's tiered with chaps whose opinion of Giles Holloway is no longer as sanguine as it once was. Giles has not fulfilled his early promise, from any point of view. When he catches sight of himself in shop windows he turns away. He isn't fifty, for Christ's sake, but he looks old and paunchy, his cheeks purpled, his eyes . . . Well, it's never a good idea to look into your own eyes.

No need to do so. We aren't meant to see ourselves as others see us. In fact it would be a bloody dull world if we did, because no one would ever make a fool of himself again. We might as well accept that we're put on this earth to make unwitting entertainment for our fellow men, and get on with doing so. The thought eases him, as it always does. Whatever balls-up he might

have made of things, it can't matter much. The train whistles for the last time, hurtling into a future that the dull streets can't imagine.

He crosses the road, glancing up at the pale, cold sky, and then down at his watch. It must be later than he thought, because he begins to walk rapidly and with purpose. He comes out on to the main road, passes the dairy and turns into a pub. At the bar he orders a double Black & White before glancing casually around. Most of the tables are empty. A young man, a clerk perhaps, nurses his half-pint in smoky peace. In the corner farthest from the window, another man sits reading the sports pages. He looks up as Giles approaches, then down at his paper. He reads on, absorbed. From time to time he reaches out an automatic hand to lift his glass to his lips.

Giles settles himself with his whisky. The fire in the grate is made up, but not lit. If this were any other pub, Giles would have the barman over and the fire going in no time. But today, in this place, Giles doesn't choose to exert his personality. He doesn't even tell the barman to keep the change, with the habitual easy generosity that gets him remembered next time.

The man at the other table reaches for the packet of Senior Service on the table in front of him, fumbles out a cigarette and strikes a match. But he's awkward, and the match snaps in a fizz of flame. It's out before he can light his cigarette. And it's his last match. The box is empty. He shakes it, annoyed. The business has drawn Giles's attention.

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‘May I offer you a light?’ he asks courteously, taking out his lighter. The man half rises, cigarette to his lips, but Giles is too polite for him, has already left his seat and is leaning forward to proffer the lighter. His bulk blocks the table from the bar. His thumb flicks the lighter catch and a perfect small flame, like a crocus, appears. The two men’s faces are illuminated as they lean towards it. Their hands are in shadow. They are worshippers at a nativity, come from far away. The packet of Senior Service on the table moves a fraction, and then is still again.

The two men are back at their separate tables. Giles drinks off his whisky. The bar is cold and stuffy, not a place to linger. The other man has sunk back into the sports page. Giles looks at his watch again, stands up, and with a nod to the barman he is out of the door. He walks briskly now, towards Finsbury Park station and the Piccadilly Line to Green Park.

Paul Callington hears a train whistle too, but he’s not sure if it’s in his head or outside it. He’s been daydreaming about Top Shed at King’s Cross. He’s a practical boy, and knows that school is probably too far from the main line for him to hear the train in reality. If the wind is from the east, he might just catch the sound. Luckily, old Craven insists on open windows throughout the winter.

Paul has already finished the Practice Intelligence Test, but he doesn’t want old Craven to know this. Craven is not fond of what he calls ‘clever clogs’, and is happy

to enforce the point with a knuckling from his bony fingers. If you finish a paper early, you should spend the remaining time checking methodically through your answers. But there's no point in checking; Paul knows that his answers are correct.

He bends over his paper, all apparent concentration. Ten minutes more for thinking about trains. The 10.00 a.m. *Flying Scotsman*, King's Cross to Edinburgh Waverley, gathering speed . . . Maybe Dad will take him to King's Cross again soon. They buy platform tickets and watch the trains. Paul's dream is to visit Top Shed. He tastes the names of the locomotives: No. 60113, *Great Northern*; No. 60052, *Prince Palatine*; No 60103, *Flying Scotsman*. It's only Paul and his father who go on these trips. Sally isn't interested, and Bridgie is too small. Mum gives them sandwiches and a flask of tea. Dad knows a lot about trains, but Paul knows more. He can tell Dad how the German smoke deflectors work on the modified No. 60059, *Tracery*. He hopes there'll be another Saturday like that soon.

The whistle shrieks again, but this time Lily, Giles and Paul hear nothing. The train is already beyond the confines of the city.