

One

In deck-chairs all along the front the bald pink knees of Bradford businessmen nuzzled the sun.

Billy Prior leant on the sea-wall. Ten or twelve feet below him a family was gathering its things together for the trek back to boarding house or railway station. A fat, middle-aged woman, swollen feet bulging over lace-up shoes, a man with a lobster-coloured tonsure – my God, he'd be regretting it tomorrow – and a small child, a boy, being towelled dry by a young woman. His little tassel wobbled as he stood, square-mouthed with pain, howling, 'Ma-a-am.' Wet sand was the problem. It always was, Prior remembered. However carefully you tiptoed back from that final paddle, your legs got coated all over again, and the towel always hurt.

The child wriggled and his mother slapped him hard, leaving red prints on his chubby buttocks. He stopped screaming, gulped with shock, then settled down to a persistent grizzle. The older woman protested, 'Hey, our Louie, there's no need for that.'

She grabbed the towel. ‘C’mon, give it here, you’ve no bloody patience, you.’

The girl – but she was not a girl, she was a woman of twenty-five or twenty-six, perhaps – retreated, resentful but also relieved. You could see her problem. Married, but the war, whether by widowing her or simply by taking her husband away, had reduced her to a position of tutelage in her mother’s house, and then what was the point? Hot spunk trickling down the thigh, the months of heaviness, the child born on a gush of blood – if all that didn’t entitle you to the status and independence of a woman, what did? Oh, and she’d be frustrated too. Her old single bed back, or perhaps a double bed with the child, listening to snores and creaks and farts from her parents’ bed on the other side of the wall.

She was scrabbling in her handbag, dislodging bus tickets, comb, purse, producing, finally, a packet of Woodbines. She let the cigarette dangle wetly from her lower lip while she groped for the matches. Her lips were plump, a pale salmon pink at the centre, darkening to brownish red at the edges. She glanced up, caught him looking at her, and flushed, not with pleasure – his lust was too blatant to be flattering – but drawn by it, nevertheless, into the memory of her unencumbered girlhood.

Her mother was helping the little boy step into his drawers, his hand a dimpled starfish on her broad shoulder. The flare of the match caught her attention. ‘For God’s sake, Louie,’ she snapped. ‘If you could only see how common you look . . .’

Louie’s gaze hadn’t moved. Her mother turned and squinted up into the sun, seeing the characteristic silhouette that said ‘officer’. ‘Look for the thin knees,’ German snipers were told, but

where they saw prey this woman saw a predator. If he'd been a private she'd have asked him what the bloody hell he thought he was gawping at. As it was, she said, 'Nice weather we're having, sir.'

Prior smiled, amused, recognizing his mother's speech, the accent of working-class gentility. 'Let's hope it lasts.'

He touched his cap and withdrew, thinking, as he strolled off, that the girl was neither a widow nor married. The way the mother's voice had cracked with panic over that word 'common' said it all. Louie's knees were by no means glued together, even after the child. And her mother was absolutely right, with that fag stuck in her mouth she did look common. Gloriously, devastatingly, *fuckably* common.

He ought to be getting back to barracks. He had his medical in less than an hour, and it certainly wouldn't do to arrive gasping. He had no business to be drifting along the front looking at girls. But he looked anyway, hoarding golden fuzz on a bare arm, the bluish shadow between breasts thrust together by stays, breathing in lavender sharpened by sweat.

The blare of music inside the fairground drew him to stand in the entrance. So far today the only young men he'd seen had been in uniform, but here were men as young as himself in civilian dress. Munitions workers. One of them was chatting to a young girl with bright yellow skin. He felt the automatic flow of bile begin and turned away, forcing himself to contemplate the bald grass. A child, holding a stick of candy-floss, turned to watch him, attracted to the man who stood so still among all the swirl and dazzle. He caught her looking at him and smiled, remembering

the soft cotton-wool sweetness of candy-floss that turned to clag on the roof of your mouth. She bridled and turned away, clutching her mother's skirt. Very wise.

As he walked on, his smile faded. *He* could have been a munitions worker, he thought. Kept out of danger. Lined his pockets. His father would have wangled him a place in a nice safe reserved occupation, and would not have despised him for it either, unlike many fathers. The weedy little runt would at least have been behaving like a *sensible* weedy little runt, refusing to fight in 'the bosses' war'. But he'd never seriously considered doing that.

Why not? he wondered now. Because I don't want to be one of *them*, he thought, remembering a munitions worker's hand patting a girl's bottom as he helped her into the swing-boat. Not duty, not patriotism, not fear of what other people would think, certainly not that. No, a kind of . . . fastidiousness. Once, as a small boy, he'd slipped chewed-up pieces of fatty mutton into the pocket of his trousers, because he couldn't bring himself to swallow them, and his father, when the crime came to light, had said, in tones of ringing disgust, 'That bairn's too fussy to live.' Too fussy to live, Prior thought. There you are, nowhere near France and an epitaph already. The thought cheered him up enormously.

By now he was walking up the hill towards the barracks, a chest-tightening climb, but he was managing it well. His asthma was good at the moment, better than it had been for months. All the same it might be as well to sit quietly somewhere for a few minutes before he went into the examination room. In the end all he could do was to turn up in a reasonable state, and answer the questions honestly (or at least tell no lies that were likely to be

found out). The decision would be taken by other people. It always was.

Though he had managed to take *one* decision himself.

His thoughts shifted to Charles Manning and the last evening they'd spent together in London.

– *Have you stopped to think what's going to happen if you're not sent back?* Manning had asked. *Six months, at least six months, probably to the end of the war, making sure new recruits wash between their toes.*

– *Might have its moments.*

– *Doing a hundred and one completely routine jobs, each of which could be done equally well by somebody else. You'd be much better working at the Ministry. I can't promise to keep the job open.*

– *No, thank you, Charles.*

No, thank you. He was passing the Clarence Gardens Hotel where he'd been stationed briefly last winter before the summons to London came. Plenty of routine jobs there. He and Owen, his fellow nut-case, had arrived on the same day, neither of them welcomed by the CO. They'd been assigned to 'light duties'. Prior became an administrative dogs-body, sorting out the battalion's chaotic filing system. Owen fared yet worse, chivvying the charladies, ordering vegetables, peering into lavatory bowls in search of unmilitary stains. Mitchell had given them hell. Prior got him in the mornings when he was *totally* vile, Owen in the evenings when brandy had mellowed him slightly.

– *What do you expect?* Prior said, when Owen complained. *He's lost two sons. And who shows up instead of them? Couple of twitching Nancy boys from a loony bin in Scotland.*

The Ghost Road

Silence from Owen.

– *That's what he thinks, you know.*

As he reached the entrance to the barracks, a squad of men in singlets and shorts, returning from a cross-country run, overtook him and he stood back to let them pass. Bare thighs streaked with mud, steam rising from sweaty chests, glazed eyes, slack mouths, and as they pounded and panted past, he recognized Owen at the head of the column, turning to wave.

‘Good heavens,’ Mather said, as Prior pulled off his shirt. ‘You haven’t been getting much outdoor exercise, have you?’

‘I’ve been working at the Ministry of Munitions.’

Mather was middle aged, furrow-cheeked, sandy-haired, shrewd.

‘All right, drop your drawers. Bend over.’

They always went for the arse, Prior thought, doing as he was told. An army marches on its stomach, and hobbles on its haemorrhoids. He felt gloved fingers on his buttocks, separating them, and thought, Better men than you have paid for this.

‘I see you’ve got asthma.’

There? ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Turn round.’

Another unduly intimate gesture.

‘Cough’

Prior cleared his throat.

‘I said, *cough.*’ The fingers jabbed. ‘And again.’ The hand changed sides. ‘Again.’

Prior was aware of wheezing as he caught his breath.

‘How long?’

Prior looked blank, then stammered. ‘S-six months, sir.’

‘Six months? But it says –’

‘I mean, the doctor told my mother I had it when I was six months old, sir.’

‘Ah.’ Mather turned over a page of the file. ‘That makes more sense.’

‘Apparently I couldn’t tolerate milk.’

Mather looked up. ‘Awkward little bugger, weren’t you? Well, we’d better have a listen.’ He reached for his stethoscope and came towards Prior. ‘What were you doing at the Ministry of Munitions?’

‘Intelligence, sir.’

‘Oooh, *very* impressive. Catch anybody?’

Prior looked bleakly ahead of him. ‘Yes.’

‘Patrol here caught a German spy on the cliffs.’ Mather snorted, fitting the stethoscope. ‘Tickled a local yokel with their bayonets more like.’

Prior started to say something, but Mather was listening to his chest. After a few minutes, he straightened up. ‘Yes, you have got a bit of a wheeze.’ His attention was caught by the scar on Prior’s elbow. He turned the arm towards him.

‘The Somme,’ Prior said.

‘Must’ve hurt.’

‘The expression “funny bone” didn’t seem appropriate at the time.’

Mather went back to the desk, sat down. ‘Now let’s see if I’ve got this straight. You were invalidated home with shell-shock. That right? April last year?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And you were sent first to Netley and then to Craiglockhart War Hospital, where you remained till . . . November.’ He looked up. ‘I suppose you get a lot of dipsomania, in places like that? *Alcohol*, man,’ he explained, as Prior continued to look blank.

‘Didn’t see any, sir. If I had I’d certainly have drunk it.’

‘So what *were* your symptoms?’

‘I was mute, sir. Some people found it an improvement on the basic model.’

But Mather was reading, not listening. ‘W. H. R. Rivers,’ he said. ‘I knew him. He was two years ahead of me at Bart’s. Paralytic stammer.’

Prior looked puzzled. ‘No.’

‘Ah? Got his own voice back too. He must be good.’ He tapped a sheet of paper. ‘The discharge report says asthma.’

‘I had two attacks while I was there.’

‘Hm.’ Mather smiled. ‘Any problems with the nerves now?’

‘No.’

‘Appetite?’

‘I could eat more than I get.’

‘So could we all, laddie. Sleeping all right?’

‘Not last night. Bloody tent leaks.’

‘Generally?’

‘I sleep all right.’

Mather sat back in his chair. ‘How did you get in?’

‘Through the flap.’

Mather’s forefinger shot up. ‘Watch it, *laddie*. How did you get into the *army*?’

A brief struggle with temptation, ending as Prior's struggles with temptation usually did. 'I lied to the doctor, Doctor.'

Surprisingly, Mather laughed, a short bark.

'Everybody lied,' Prior said.

'So they did, I remember it well. I saw men who'd climbed out of the window of the workhouse infirmary to come and enlist. Syphilis, epilepsy, tuberculosis, rickets. One lad – little squeaky voice, not a hair on his chin, fourteen, if that – looked me straight in the eye and swore on his mother's life he was nineteen.' Mather smiled, revealing brown teeth. 'Not one of them got past me.'

Oh fuck.

'Gas training,' Mather said.

Silence.

'Well?'

'*Terribly* good idea,' Prior said earnestly.

'Did you go through the huts?'

'No.'

'You must be affected at very low concentrations?'

'I was known as the battalion canary, sir. Partly that. Partly my pleasant, cheerful personality.'

Mather looked at him. 'Get dressed.'

'The point is I managed perfectly well *for three years*. I didn't *once* report sick with asthma *or* the effects of gas.'

'Yes, laddie.' Mather looked unexpectedly compassionate. 'And it might be said you've done your bit.'

A twitch of the pale, proud face. 'Not by me.'

'And the asthma never played you up in France?'

'Never.'

‘Two attacks in Craiglockhart. None in France. I wonder why?’

‘Open-air life suited my chest, sir.’

‘We’re not running a sanatorium, laddie. Go on, get dressed. Then you go left along the corridor, turn left at the end, and you’ll see a row of chairs. Wait there.’

Mather went into the adjoining room and started on his next victim. Prior dressed, pausing to wipe the sweat off his upper lip. Like going over the top, he thought. No, it wasn’t. Nothing was like that. Civilians seemed to use that expression all the time now. I went a bit over the top last night, they said, meaning they’d had a second glass of port. Prior peered into the small looking-glass behind the wash-basin, checking the knot in his tie. If they didn’t send him back he was going to be awfully lonely, marooned among civilians with their glib talk. His reflection jeered, *Lonely? You? Oh, c’mon, duckie. You can always split in two.* At least the Board didn’t know about *that*. Or rather they didn’t, provided Rivers hadn’t written to them. A *paralytic* stammer. Not just any old stammer. Paralytic. Interesting, Prior thought, letting himself out of the room.

The place smelled like a barracks. Well, it was a barracks, but the Clarence Gardens Hotel, after months of army use, had not smelled anything like this. His nose twitched, identifying armpits, feet, socks, oil, boot-polish, carbolic soap, the last blown in bubbles between the raw fingers of a boy scrubbing the floor. Rear-end like a truck and a face to match, but Prior produced a charming smile, nevertheless, because he owed it to himself, and strode on, leaving a trail of muddy footprints across the wet floor.

One man waiting. Owen.

‘The O’s and the P’s again,’ Owen said, picking up a pile of *John Bulls* from the vacant chair and dumping them on the floor. They’d last waited together like this at Craiglockhart, at their final board.

Prior jerked his head at the door. ‘Who’s in?’

‘Nesbit. He’s been in thirty minutes.’

‘What’s taking so long?’

Owen hesitated, then mouthed, ‘Clap.’

Well, Prior thought, that was one way of getting out of it. And then he thought, You uncharitable bastard, how do you know he got it deliberately? And then he thought, Well, I *am* an uncharitable bastard.

‘I won’t take long,’ Owen said. ‘I’m GS already.’

‘Then why are you here?’

‘Irregular heartbeat. I added my name to the draft, but when I had the final medical they promptly took it off again.’

‘You added your name to the draft? Sure it’s your *heart* that’s wrong?’

Owen laughed, and looked away. ‘I’d just heard Sassoon was wounded. It seemed the only thing to do.’

Yes, Prior thought, it would. He remembered them at Craiglockhart: the incongruous pair, Sassoon so tall, Owen so short, the love Owen hadn’t been able, or hadn’t bothered, to disguise.

‘*Also*,’ Owen said, ‘I was getting pretty tired of being regarded as “a twitching Nancy boy from a loony bin in Scotland”.’

Prior smiled. ‘I applied it to myself as well.’

Owen had cut himself shaving, he noticed. Blood in shiny brown flakes filled the crease between cheek and earlobe.

The Ghost Road

‘Do you think you’ll be all right this time?’

Owen said cheerfully, ‘Oh, yes, I should think so. I’ve been doing a lot of running.’

‘I saw.’

The door opened. Nesbit came out, looking distinctly pale.

Owen stood up. ‘Do they want me in?’

‘I don’t know.’

Owen sat down again. ‘Worse than the dentist, isn’t it?’ he said, forcing a laugh.

A few minutes later he was called in. Prior sat listening to the murmur of voices, thinking what bloody awful luck it was to have got Mather. Some MOs would send a corpse back if you propped one up in front of them, particularly now when every man was needed for the latest in a long line of ‘one last pushes’. Abruptly, before he was ready, the door opened and Owen came out. Owen started to speak and then, realizing the Board’s secretary had followed him, raised a thumb instead. From which Prior concluded that Owen’s chances of ending the year deaf, blind, dumb, paralysed, doubly incontinent, insane, brain damaged or – if he were lucky – just plain dead had enormously increased. We’re all mad here, he thought, following the secretary into the room, saluting, sitting down in the solitary chair facing the long table, meeting every eye confidently but not *too* confidently. And really, amidst the general insanity, was it fair to penalize a man merely because in conditions of extreme stress he tended to develop two separate personalities? You *could* argue the army was getting a bargain.

After the first few questions he began to relax. They were concentrating on his asthma and the risks of exposure to gas, and to

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those questions he had one totally convincing answer: he had been out to France three times and on none of these occasions had he been invalided back to base or home to England because of asthma. Trench fever, yes; wound, yes; shell-shock, yes. Asthma, *no*.

When the last question had been asked and answered, Mitchell drew the papers together in front of him, and patted them into shape. Prior watched the big white hands with their sprinkling of age spots and the shadowing of hair at the sides.

‘Right,’ Mitchell said at last. ‘I think that’s all . . .’

The pause was so long Prior began to wonder whether he would ever speak again.

‘Your asthma’s worse than you’re letting on, isn’t it?’ He tapped the discharge report. ‘According to this anyway.’

‘It *was* bad at Craiglockhart, sir. But I can honestly say it was worse there than it ever was in France.’

‘Well,’ Mitchell said. ‘Results posted this afternoon.’ He smiled briskly. ‘You won’t have long to wait.’

Two

Crude copies of Tenniel's drawings from *Alice in Wonderland* decorated one end of Ward Seven, for in peacetime this had been a children's hospital. Alice, tiny enough to swim in a sea of her own tears; Alice, unfolding like a telescope till she was nine feet tall; Alice, grown so large her arm protruded from the window; and, most strikingly, Alice with the serpent's neck, undulating above the trees.

Behind Rivers, a creaking trolley passed from bed to bed: the patients' breakfast dishes were being cleared away.

'Come on, Captain McBride, drink up,' Sister Roberts said, crackling past. 'We've not got all day, you know.'

This was said loudly, for *his* benefit. He'd arrived on the ward too early, before they were ready for him.

'You knew him, didn't you?' Elliot Smith said, coming up to him, looking over his shoulder.

Rivers looked puzzled.

'Lewis Carroll.'

'Oh, yes. Yes.'