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The Good-looking Guy with the Glass

Why you all get taken in by this Harriet?

We weren't taken in by Harriet, we just liked her style. Not that there was anything flashy about Harriet, that's the point; her style was sparse, minimal, which suggested, if anything, the general move away from clutter, from refugeeness: *Not that we're accusing anyone we know of being a refugee.* And since she had only one sister, and that didn't suggest a childhood surrounded by chaos and noise, kids screaming all over the place, competing for the parents' attention, Harriet's style wasn't that easy to explain. *Her parents' attention?*

What parents? my sister asked.

OK. The mother. For the mother's attention. (For the father, like a father, was often away from home.)

But Harriet was usually quick to point out that the father didn't spend any more time away from home than other fathers did; only in this case the dad organised it in, well...in blocks of time, whereas even now, here in these countries too, the father managed to disguise being out of the house most of the hours of daylight, leaving for work and coming home from work at the start or the end of the day. Even

at weekends they avoided quality time with the family, by heading for the pub or betting shop. Or hijacking the sitting-room for the worship of football, to be indulged by others in the house who didn't believe in that religion. It was almost better, in the old days, to see the Lord and master prostrate on his back at Sunday worship, in the street outside, gazing up into the mysteries of the motorcar.

Not that she was defending the dad in pointing out these things; it was her sister, who hadn't come to England, who was in the habit of defending the dad; Harriet herself was quite relaxed about friends who had a different view about these things; she didn't need to show people evidence of her life.

And whereas I could see the advantages of growing up in a household where there was no Big Daddy to boss you about, and hog the bathroom just when you needed it, and be served the best pieces of meat at table, and have the right to beat up your mother—not that this happened to us as my father wasn't at home either; but it happened to some of my friends, and it happened in the newspapers and on television—I still felt that Harriet went a little far, in her flat one night, when she pointed to something that had captured the attention of one of her guests, and revealed that the “good-looking guy with the glass,” was her father. And that, yes, he could serve as a sort of role-model for others less fortunate. The fellow was stuck up on the mantle-piece, in a small frame, and looked suspicious.

To start with he seemed a bit young for her dad. Or, perhaps, a bit more groomed than you would have imagined: *so her fastidiousness was inherited!* Though, one had to be careful: the dad on view was the pretty-boy type that was easy to brand as irresponsible; he had neatly-combed and parted hair, and the bottom row of teeth showed through the smile, all in good order. Other things came through to alert you to something posed—that general air of ease and leisure and relaxation that the picture

suggested. The soft, white shirt was expensive, one sleeve loosely folded to the elbow revealing a chain, a loose bracelet, well down on the arm, nearer elbow than wrist, casually right; and the hand held a glass of white wine.

That was not the picture of any old dad we knew. Dads were stiffer than that, the way they held themselves. Even when their bodies were loose, they were still stiffer than that—particularly in those early photos taken away from home. Usually, dads wore some sort of uniform; an army uniform, or a uniform with a dog collar. Those of the distant past, who went to places like Detroit to build motorcars—all looked as if they were in uniform, posing beside huge bits of machinery or factory architecture. There was even a famous photo of Pascoe's uncle standing in some hush place in front of an aeroplane that he and his mates had built.

But this picture of Harriet's dad was different; it exuded relaxation and a lack of tension that you had to call *class*: *why was the chain on the man's arm so neat and unflashy? Why was the drink in the glass white wine? Why was the white wine in such a long-stemmed glass? Why did it all fit so neatly Harriet's dream of an understated flat?*

My sister, who wasn't a particular friend of Harriet's, pointed out that that was not the picture of a man who cared for his family. That picture was one of *personal* preening and *solo* well-being: for a man to strike that sort of pose abroad, it meant only one thing, that he wasn't missing the family; that he was having a good time, thank you very much, away from all that mess and responsibility of women and children—a good time shared with others who may well have been cut out of this picture for a purpose. This picture was clearly a *detail* sent back to placate those left behind. Or worse.

There were rougher types from the islands, that we all knew, whose photos caused us less of a problem. These crude fellows from the country would all make sure they ended up living in the capital city abroad, as if that conferred a sort of legitimacy. One of those fellows—to come back to Harriet's picture—would have taken a little bit of the gold from the chain on his arm and put it into his mouth; he would have got someone to coat his teeth with it. Just one tooth, perhaps. To show style. And of course the drink, the drink in the hand would not be white wine.

That night in question, when the guests had gone Harriet resolved to write to the dad: "I am very well and happy." That's how she would start the letter.

In Canada, Harriet's dad was thinking about Harriet. He loved her, of course; and knew she would do well in her studies: she had taken after him; she would not throw away her advantages. Though the mother spoilt her, the child would survive that, and sometimes it was no bad thing to err on the lenient side, particularly when the environment in which you found yourself was one where no one knew your value. So the girl was headstrong and wanted to go her own way: that must cost her some. She had every right to expect credit for the *style* she maintained, scorning all that climate of *accommodation* around her. A dad would be right for her now.

And yes; at a certain time in life, a man must choose to be responsible. A man was not whole, not complete without the family around him: family scattered all over the place made no sense any more. That made sense only if it was done to some strategic purpose. But there were no countries in the world named after him; there was nothing, even playfully stupid, named after him. So present policy wasn't working. If his family had branched out he could hardly lay claim now to being that steady *tree* people talked about. Unless he started grafting those branches back onto the old trunk.

But then again, he could leave things as they were. His life wasn't that bad; his life was pretty good. Nothing was in crisis. And where would she be, exactly; his missing limb? How was she to be addressed now she was no longer a child and in need? What name would she be accustomed to answering to?

Some years later, in a restaurant in Stoke Newington Harriet was thinking how unfair it was of a couple of her friends to question the account of the break-in at her flat: the entire world had gone into police mode thinking that evidence had to "add up," that reports of an incident had to be consistent. Then she looked up from her Vegetarian Fajitas and saw him. There was no mistaking this time. Nor would she miss her moment. She reached for the handbag and snapped it open. There was no haste. She clutched the cold handle of something she hoped wouldn't let her down.