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About 2000 words

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**The Beautiful Husband
by Nike Sulway**

We were all changed after the war, all monstrous. Father had died, Mother had gone mad, Kath had become a journalist. She wore pants and smoked cigarettes. She was still married to Harvey, but when he came back from overseas he had a stump in place of his right leg. It was made from the wood of an apple tree and, if he was feeling playful – which wasn't often – he'd pluck apples from his pockets and say they'd grown there.

Mother had said, when Harvey first signed up and Kath announced they were going to marry before he shipped out, *Marry in haste, repent at leisure*.

Harvey wore his uniform to church, but whenever anyone asked him about the war he would change the subject or look away. Kath said he loved her like a sister, now, rather than a wife. She said only part of him had come home.

I'd been too young to marry before the war. Still in school while my sister marched against conscription, against the war her husband was fighting, that our father died in. But when I was eighteen Kath said it was time, that she couldn't support us all much longer. So I went on dates, and stood against the walls at dances in her best dress, adjusted to fit. But I had no knack for love. The men were handsome enough. Tall. Short. Dark. Light. Their skin close-shaven, or their beards smelling of clean wax. They would ask me to dance or buy me a beer and we'd do our best to like each other. But none of them ever hooked my breath out of my body.

I met my husband in the foyer of the newspaper office. I was waiting for Kath to come down so we could race up to Quong Tart's in King Street for tea. My husband came in to organise an *In Memoriam* listing for his brother. The last of his family, who had died of the influenza.

Oh, he was fine. He was slender and tall, with narrow shoulders and narrow hips. He wore a pin-striped suit and a white shirt with silver cufflinks and a silver tie-pin. He smelled of cinnamon and marshmallows. His hair was black as a raven's wing, and swept back off his high forehead. He walked quickly and lightly. Even the way he folded his umbrella and shook off the rain was breathtaking. Every movement he made, every gesture, seemed choreographed.

Kath and I were still in the foyer, looking out at the rain, when he came to leave. He smiled at me. 'No umbrella?' he said.

Kath laughed. 'I'd make a run for it,' she said. 'But little bird here is afraid of getting wet. Afraid of the 'flu.' I was afraid of nothing, but didn't say so. This was her way: to let me know who I was by announcing my character to the world.

He held out his umbrella. It had an ivory neck, carved like a swan. The ivory was warm from the touch of his hand. 'Here,' he said. 'Take mine. I'll come back tomorrow to collect it.'

I would have protested, even if Kath would not, but as soon as he finished speaking he ducked out the door, pulled his jacket over his head, and dashed into the rain.

He came back the next day, and the next. It rained for seven days, and that was long enough for us to fall in love. It was easier than breathing, once I'd got the knack for it. When I told Kath we were going to be married she wrapped me in her arms and squashed my face against her shoulder. 'He's an odd one,' she said. 'But if you love him, it'll all be right.'

I wonder, still, what our mother would have said.

Kath told me what to expect on our wedding night; I blushed and nodded and heard not a thing. When the time came, he turned out every light and closed the curtains. The room was black as pitch. I couldn't see the hand before my own face. In that darkness, he undressed us both. I had never known my body as he taught it to me. Never understood that it was a landscape of storms, of floods and tempests that he could raise, and soothe.

'How was it?' my sister asked, when we returned from our honeymoon.

I blushed and dropped my head.

'Lucky girl,' she said.

A memory of his hand sliding over my hip made me blush even more.

'Details!' she demanded. 'Tell me every single thing.'

I told her how he closed the curtains and doused the lights. How I would fall asleep in his arms and wake to find him up and dressed, sitting by the window.

'You've never seen him naked?'

I had to think. I could picture his neck, his wrists. 'I guess not.'

'Is there something wrong with him?' she said. 'Is he ... damaged?'

'No!'

She raised one eyebrow and gave me a look that suggested otherwise. That said she could discern, without even looking, what I could not.

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That night, I put out a hand to stop him from turning out the light. 'I want to see you,' I said. I had practiced this line. Had imagined it sounding seductive.

He shook his head. 'Are you happy?' he said. 'Are you ... content?'

'God, yes! I just ... you're so perfect. I want to look at you. I want us to know everything about each other.'

He would not meet my gaze. 'I will give you everything,' he said. I had never heard him sound so vulnerable. So afraid. 'Share everything with you. I will love you more completely than any man has ever loved any woman. But you cannot see me. If you see ... this,' he gestured at his body; wretchedness skewed his beautiful face, 'I will have to leave you.'

'But why?'

He shook his head. A tear as perfect as a pearl fell to his cheek. 'My darling,' he said. 'Don't ask me.'

'Are you injured? Like Harvey? I don't care. I'll love you no matter what the war did to you.'

'I'm not injured,' he said. 'It wasn't the war.' The tear slipped from his cheek to his shirt.

I put my hand on his chest, on his skin. The urge to tear his shirt open and let him see that my love was unchanged by whatever lay beneath it was almost overwhelming.

He put his hand over mine. Held it fast. 'Promise me,' he said.

I would have done anything to keep him. I would have promised to eat the moon. I said the words he wanted to hear, then reached past him and turned off the light.

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'Never?!' my sister said.

'It's not such a big deal.'

We were in the kitchen, making dinner. Harvey and my husband were in the lounge, listening to the radio.

'What's wrong with him?' she whispered.

'Nothing,' I said. 'It's not that.'

'What is it then?'

'I don't know.'

'It could be anything!' she said. 'He could be hideous. Deformed.'

'He's not hideous.'

'How do you know?' She looked out into the hall, moved next to me. Whispered. 'You could sneak a look.'

She grabbed my hand and dragged me, giggling, into our parents' old room. She lay on the floor beside their bed and shuffled underneath it. The dust made us both sneeze. The wall behind the bedhead was shared with the bathroom. Our mother had complained about this all our lives: about how every time someone washed their hands or flushed the toilet, the water had gurgled and sloshed right beside her sleeping head. She dreamed of drowning. Of ships at sea. When my father had showered in the dark, waking before dawn to get ready for work, she would wake in a terror, certain her bed was adrift at sea.

'Look!' my sister said, and pulled me close. There was a hole in the bedroom wall. As round as an eye. My stomach lurched. I pictured my husband in that room, slipping his coat from his shoulders, unbuttoning his cuffs. I was glad it was dark under the bed. Glad my sister could not see me burning with unwifely desire.

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I waited a year.

For six months it was enough to imagine myself on the floor beneath my parents' bed. My husband in the bathroom. His suit jacket hung on a hook behind the door. His shoes on the floor. His shirt on a hook. His pants, too. My husband stepping into the shower. The slender gleam of his back, water slipping over his skin. But then I began to ache. My teeth ached in my jaw. My bones ached in their joints. My fingers ached. It was like hunger. Like starvation. I felt sure I would die if I couldn't see him. And what harm would it do, I told myself. What harm, my sister said. Just a glimpse.

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The floorboards were cool and hard. I had to lift myself up a little to put my eye to the hole in the wall. He came into the bathroom and closed the door, locked it. Put his hand against it, and tested the lock. I felt ashamed then, seeing how careful he was, how afraid, but it wasn't enough to stop me.

He turned his back to me, sat on the edge of the bath to slip off his shoes and socks. He took off his jacket and hung it, just as I had dreamed he would. Then his shirt. His back was smooth and pale. There was a cluster of freckles on the back of his left shoulder. He stood and slipped off his pants off. Then he turned.

I pulled back from the hole in the wall, banged my head on the underside of the bed and bit my tongue. Tasted blood. *Oh God*, I thought. *Oh Christ. Oh God*. I knew I had made a noise. I could still feel it scraping my throat. I put my eye to the hole in the wall and looked again. I stared and stared, and my husband just

stood there, hands hanging by his sides, not moving. As if he knew. As if everything was lost.

When he came into our bedroom I was sitting on the end of the bed. All the lights were on, but the curtains were drawn. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to begin, so I was coarse and stupid.

'You're a woman,' I said.

'I am not,' he said.

'I saw you.'

'I am not a woman,' he said. He looked down at his shoes and frowned, as if there was a mark that he had not polished away, but could not bend to remedy. 'You broke your promise.'

'I did,' I said. 'But you--'

He looked straight at me, and the breath was hooked out of me again. Not with love, this time. Or not only with love. But because he was so very fine. His raven's wing, his soft cheek, his cupid's lips. And because he was no longer mine.

He said nothing, but I knew that he would leave me. As he had said he would.

I don't know where he went. He took almost nothing, and left no trace. I cannot call the police. What would I tell them: that my husband left me because I looked at him?

At night, I close the windows; I turn out all the lights. It is black as pitch in our bedroom, black as loss. I hear the water in the pipes and close my eyes. No storms overwhelm me. No tempests flood the sheets. He has flown, my beautiful husband, my raven. I will never see him again.

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