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Odd Man Out

My darling Brother,

I'm just longing for your leave to begin. Our tiny flat is overflowing with booze for your homecoming — and flowers everywhere — thanks to Grant, my very latest. I haven't told you about him, have I? Lieutenant in the Navy — we see each other every day. He is different, and I believe *this time* it's the Real Thing! I *suspect*, possibly, it's marriage or nothing. An old-fashioned type, and far from being smash-and-grab, he doesn't even crush one in taxis. He's high, wide and handsome. I know you'll love him. He's asked a lot about you.

This is only to say, don't expect me to meet you as I shall be at the hairdressers. Grant may be there when you arrive, if so entertain him and ply him with drink till I come.

All love,
Barbara.

The train was approaching London. John put the letter away and started to get his kit together.

«I know you'll love him!» He smiled ruefully. He and his twin sister most unfortunately had the same taste in men. This was to be just another occasion when he'd have to take a back seat and watch, with anguish, jealousy, envy, the man of Barbara's choice, falling for Barbara, kissing Barbara, loving Barbara . . .

In the taxi on the way to the flat John tried to visualise this new menace to his peace of mind: «Big» . . . «different» . . . «the old-fashioned type» . . .

As he put his latchkey in the door he braced himself for the encounter, but the small flat was empty.

A few minutes later, as he was soaking in a hot bath he heard the front door open. This must be the new heart-throb, he thought. Footsteps, and then a voice: «Hallo there! This is Grant. Would you be Barbara's brother?»

«Yes!» he shouted back, «Fix yourself a drink. I'll be out in a minute».

Luxuriating in the hot bath, John was in no hurry, however, to get out, and was surprised a little later to hear a knock on the door. «It's me, Grant, could I come in and wash my hands?»

Their first meeting was certainly an unconventional one, in the steamy bathroom, John naked in the bathtub, Grant apologetically washing his hands. «Do forgive me, but I just had to wash my hands», he explained.

«It's all right», replied the other. When the Lieutenant had finished he turned round and they were face to face; their eyes met, and John felt an almost unbearable excitement as dry hand clasped wet hand in a firm, long hold.

«I've wanted so much to meet you — and aren't you and Barbara alike!» «Well, we're twins . . .»

«You and I are going to be good friends, aren't we?»

Aren't we? Are we? Could it be possible to be «friends» with anyone who did that to one's heart? It would be the same pattern all over again: Odd man out . . . sitting alone watching him dance with Barbara . . . looking away while they kissed goodnight . . . pretending not to notice the sly, secret caresses in public places . . . making excuses to leave early so that they could be alone together . . .

John had hardly finished dressing when his sister danced in, looking more maddeningly enchanting than ever.

«Angel» she cried, and rushed and threw her arms round him.

Soon all three were talking at once, ice was clinking in glasses, there was warmth and laughter.

They were to go to a play that night, and then on to a nightclub. It was the beginning of John's ordeal.

Every day he saw Grant; every night the three of them went out somewhere — theatre, cabaret, the cinema, dancing . . . The odd man out. Watching them dance together, Barbara held close in his arms . . . looking the other way when they were to kiss goodnight . . . going early to bed, using any odd excuse, to leave them alone together . . . And every day he fell deeper in love with the man his sister had decided to marry.

And he began to hate her, to hate his adored twin, to burn with detestable, painful jealousy.

But there were straws to be clutched at, eagerly, desperately, that gave a little comfort . . . or prolonged the agony?

There was the time they were all three walking home from the «Local» one cold evening. Usually Barbara was between the two men, but on this occasion Grant happened to be in the middle. John had his hands in his overcoat pockets for warmth, and to his astonishment he felt Grant's hand in his pocket, feeling for his. They held hands like that till they reached the flat.

Another time they were lolling on the sofa listening to old gramophone records. Sophie Tucker was singing «The Man I love», and when it came to the lines:

«He'll look at me and smile
I'll understand;
And in a little while,
He'll hold my hand . . .»

John felt, rather than saw, Barbara on the other side stretch out her hand and at the same time Grant took hold of his, and pressed it.

Then there was one occasion when the two were dancing and John was looking on. As they passed near table, the crooner was singing:

«*Must* you dance . . .
Quite so close,
With your lips
Touching his face . . .»

They were dancing very close together, and when it came to the lines: «Won't you change partners . . .», for an instant Grant's eyes looked directly into his. With meaning? By chance? «Change partners» . . . if only

And unlike Barbara's other men, there was no obvious sign of relief,

thinly covered over with conventional regrets, when John made excuses to leave early. No, Grant seemed genuinely sorry, almost upset, when he pleaded a headache or tiredness; and perhaps would have broken up the party, but for Barbara.

The twins had an old habit of having a late night chat in one or the other's bedroom. Usually they told each other everything, or almost everything, for there was *one* secret Barbara wasn't to know.

«I can't understand, Grant», she confided in him one night, «he isn't like the other men I've been around with; he's never propositioned me once! And he only pays me the most obvious compliments. And when he kisses me goodnight, well, he might be a brother! What IS wrong do you think? Can it be that I'm slipping? Do you like him?»

Like him? No, I only adore him, long for him, worship him, thought John.

«Yes», he replied, «I think he's nice».

«He likes you too, he's always talking about you.»

As the days went by, a little intangible barrier grew up between the twins, and their once intimate talks became a trifle strained. Barbara was worried, for she didn't know the reason for this, and John, who knew the reason, was worried too. He felt deeply guilty. He was nervous too, unhappy, drinking too much.

The last night of his leave they had planned all to go out together — a theatre and on to an exclusive nightclub, but in the morning, John, after an almost sleepless night, decided he couldn't face it. He made an unconvincing excuse, and no amount of pleading would make him alter his decision. He knew that he had been disagreeable, that he was behaving childishly, and felt that he had upset not only Barbara but Grant as well, and this only added to his misery.

John was just about to go out — where he didn't know, but the main object was to avoid seeing either of them till the time came to-morrow to say goodbye. He would go and get tight somewhere . . . And then the 'phone rang. It was Barbara.

«Darling!», she exclaimed, «I'm so relieved you're in. I'm at the hairdresser's and can't get back for some time. Grant is coming to the flat. Be an angel and let him in — he lost the key — and stay with him till I come?»

«But»

«No, *please* darling. This is *important*, and don't ask me why. Promise?»

John sighed. «Well, all right, I promise». What could she be up to now, he wondered, and was more mystified when she added: «You'll see — *everything is going to be all right!*»

What she meant by that he couldn't guess, but felt strangely comforted. Everything is going to be all right? He poured himself a large whisky, and at that moment a key turned in the lock and Grant burst in.

«So you hadn't lost your key.» John exclaimed.

«Lost my key? Why no, what made you think I had? I came specially early to say goodbye before you went out».

«But I'll see you tomorrow anyway. Have a drink?»

John felt his heart beating strongly as they stood drinking side by side. They had seldom been alone together. He didn't dare look at Grant for fear his eyes would give him away. Instead, he fixed his gaze on the blue Melton cloth of the uniform sleeve. The sight and feel of that naval material would long cause him a pang, he knew, whenever he came across it. —

There was a short awkward silence as they sipped their drinks, then Grant spoke, softly.

«Must you really go out to-night? I feel I should be the one to go.» John was silent.

«Please tell me», he went on, «What is wrong? Have I done something to offend you? I like you . . . a lot . . . more than I can say. But you always make excuses to get away from me. Please tell me, *why* is it? Is it because you don't like me?»

Grant had taken a step nearer and now they were close together. John stood there trembling, not daring to look up. The proximity became unbearable. I must move away, go, he thought, before he sees . . .

«Is that right?», the soft voice, almost a whisper now, persisted, «because you . . . don't like me?»

John could bear it no longer — he *must* get away.

«Perhaps», he replied, brokenly, «It's because I like you too much». And then he started for the door, blinded by tears, and suddenly he felt a strong hand grasp his shoulder, pulling him back violently.

«Let me go!» he cried angrily, but he struggled in vain, and felt himself forcibly pulled round.

«You little idiot!» Grant was saying, incredibly, «You little *fool!*», he shouted, «Why didn't you tell me before? Are you blind? Can't you see, its *you* I love, *you* I love!»

John ceased to struggle and found himself crushed in strong arms, being kissed wildly, then lifted up and carried to the sofa. There they lay together, murmuring all those little things they had both longed to say to each other.

They were clasped so closely together that neither of them heard the key turn in the lock. Only when Barbara said «Hello!» did they realize her presence. They sprang up, overcome with embarrassment, but Barbara, dropping coat and bag, rushed to them and standing on tiptoe, gave each in turn a kiss.»

«My children!», she exclaimed. You have my blessing! I'm so glad it worked — but if you could have *seen* how funny you looked when you jumped up!»

«But . . . you don't *mind?*» was all that John, in his astonishment, was able to get out.

«On the contrary, I'm quite relieved! I was afraid I must be losing my grip», she joked. «And how blind I must have been! You know it suddenly came to me, while I was under the dryer — such a good time to think — so I rang both of you up so that you should meet. I wasn't *quite* sure, but I thought that was what was the matter. I hoped this would happen», she went on, while the two boys stood dumb with astonishment, «but I won't say I'm not a bit jealous!», she laughed, «imagine my twin brother taking my best man away!»

«But — neither of us knew that the other . . . » began Grant . . .

«I know you didn't, poor lambs», she broke in. «Well, now I have two brothers! Let's pour ourselves a loving cup to celebrate!»

This time the two men were sitting on the sofa, close together and blissfully happy, while Barbara lolled in the big armchair.

«I must say», she murmured, «It's a novel experience for me to be the odd man out!»

M. M. W.

“The Crash”

by Paul Peters

Crash!

With a start I jumped up from my desk where I had been writing, and ran into the lane. Across the lane I saw a small sportscar lying on its side in the ditch. I jumped into the ditch and pulled the semi-conscious figure of the driver out of the seat. It was just as well that I arrived as quickly as I did at the scene of the accident, for the ditch was half-filled with water.

I struggled up the bank, and carrying the driver in my arms, I hurried back into the house and laid him down on the bench. He was very dazed and moaned slightly. Then I pulled off the leather cap and the goggles . . . and almost let out a cry, for the face I saw before me was that of Ricky Benson. In that spit second memories flooded back.

Ricky and I had grown up in the same neighbourhood, and whilst we were never close friends we had been in the same Scout troop. I was a year or so older but very shy and whilst I longed to have him as a friend, was always too timid to speak to him except when we were in a group. Then one summer just before we left school we went to camp together. For the first few days the weather had been perfect and we had all slept out under the trees, but on the last night it had rained and we erected our little bivouac tents and the Scout master had allocated the two of us to one of these tents. We had undressed in silence, crept inside and as the rain had made the night somewhat chilly, Ricky had suggested that we make up one bed with our groundsheets on top of one another and the blankets over us. We said goodnight and within a few minutes Ricky was fast asleep but I could not sleep — my mind was in a torment, happy to be alone with him and yet still unable to tell him all the things I wanted to say. After a time he turned over and his arm went over my body. I drew closer, scarcely daring to breathe, until we lay quite close together, and the warmth of his body sent a wonderful feeling of ecstasy through me. Slowly I allowed my hand to slide under his pyjama jacket and rub up and down on his smooth skin and his firm muscles.

Then I felt his hand respond, and without a word being exchanged we allowed each other's hand to explore all the surface of our bodies. The passions, thus aroused had to reach their climax and then we slept.

Next morning I wanted to say so much, but when Ricky just smiled at me and said «Well, I slept really well» — there was nothing to say