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ALSO BY JACQUELINE HARPMAN

Orlanda

JACQUELINE HARPMAN
**I WHO HAVE
NEVER KNOWN
MEN**

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Sophie Mackintosh

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I Who Have Never Known Men

Since I barely venture outside these days, I spend a lot of time in one of the armchairs, rereading the books. I only recently started taking an interest in the prefaces. The authors talk readily about themselves, explaining their reasons for writing the book. This surprises me: surely it was more usual in that world than in the one in which I have lived for people to pass on the knowledge they had acquired? They often seem to feel the need to emphasise that they wrote the book not out of vanity, but because someone asked them to, and that they had thought about it long and hard before accepting. How strange! It suggests that people were not avid to learn, and that you had to apologise for wanting to convey your knowledge. Or, they explain why they felt it was appropriate to publish a new translation of Proust, because previous efforts, laudable though they may be, lacked something or other. But why translate when it must have been so easy to learn different languages and read anything you wanted directly? These things leave me utterly baffled. True, I am extremely ignorant: apparently, I know even less of these matters than I thought I did. The authors express their gratitude to those who taught them, who opened the door to this or

that avenue of knowledge, and, because I have absolutely no idea what they're talking about, I usually read these words with a degree of indifference. But suddenly, yesterday, my eyes filled with tears; I thought of Anthea, and was overcome by a tremendous wave of grief. I could picture her, sitting on the edge of a mattress, her knees to one side, sewing patiently with her makeshift thread of plaited hairs which kept snapping, stopping to look at me, astonished, quick to recognise my ignorance and teach me what she knew, apologising that it was so little, and I felt a huge wrench, and began to sob. I had never cried before. There was a pain in my heart as powerful as the pain of the cancer in my belly, and I who no longer speak because there is no one to hear me, began to call her. Anthea! Anthea! I shouted. I couldn't forgive her for not being there, for having allowed death to snatch her, to tear her from my clumsy arms. I chastised myself for not having held on to her, for not having understood that she couldn't go on any more. I told myself that I'd abandoned her because I was frigid, as I had been all my life, as I shall be when I die, and so I was unable to hug her warmly, and that my heart was frozen, unfeeling, and that I hadn't realised that I was desperate.

Never before had I been so devastated. I would have sworn it couldn't happen to me; I'd seen women trembling, crying and screaming, but I'd remained unaffected by their tragedy, a witness to impulses I found unintelligible, remaining silent even when I did what they asked of me to assist them. Admittedly, we were all caught up in the same drama that was so powerful, so all-embracing that I was unaware of anything that wasn't related to it, but I had

come to think that I was different. And now, racked with sobs, I was forced to acknowledge too late, much too late, that I too had loved, that I was capable of suffering and that I was human after all.

I felt as if this pain would never be appeased, that it had me in its grip for ever, that it would prevent me from devoting myself to anything else, and that I was allowing it to do so. I think that that is what they call being consumed with remorse. I would no longer be able to get up, think, or even cook my food, and I would let myself slowly waste away. I was deriving a sort of morbid pleasure from imagining myself giving in to despair, when the physical pain returned. It was so sudden and so acute that it distracted me from the mental pain. I found this abrupt swing from one to the other funny, and there I was, I who not surprisingly never laugh, doubled up in agony, and laughing.

When the pain abated, I wondered whether I had ever laughed before. The women often used to laugh, and I believe I had sometimes joined in, but I was unsure. I realised then that I never thought about the past. I lived in a perpetual present and I was gradually forgetting my story. At first, I shrugged, telling myself that it would be no great loss, since nothing had happened to me, but soon I was shocked by that thought. After all, if I was a human being, my story was as important as that of King Lear or of Prince Hamlet that William Shakespeare had taken the trouble to relate in detail. I made the decision almost without realising it: I would do likewise. Over the years, I'd learned to read fluently; writing is much harder, but I've never been daunted by obstacles. I do have paper and

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pencils, although I may not have much time. Now that I no longer go off on expeditions, no occupation calls me, so I decided to start at once. I went into the cold store, took out the meat that I would eat later and left it to defrost, so that when hunger struck, my food would soon be ready. Then I sat down at the big table and began to write.

As I write these words, my tale is over. Everything around me is in order and I have fulfilled the final task I set myself. It only took me a month, which has perhaps been the happiest month of my life. I do not understand that: after all, what I was describing was only my strange existence which hasn't brought me much joy. Is there a satisfaction in the effort of remembering that provides its own nourishment, and is what one recollects less important than the act of remembering? That is another question that will remain unanswered: I feel as though I am made of nothing else.

As far back as I can recall, I have been in the bunker. Is that what they mean by memories? On the few occasions when the women were willing to tell me about their past, their stories were full of events, comings and goings, men... but I am reduced to calling a memory the sense of existing in the same place, with the same people and doing the same things – in other words, eating, excreting and sleeping. For a very long time, the days went by, each one just like the day before, then I began to think, and everything changed. Before, nothing happened other than this repetition of identical gestures, and time seemed to stand still, even if I was vaguely aware that I was growing and that time was passing. My memory begins with my anger.

Obviously, I have no way of knowing how old I was. The others had been adult for a long time whereas I appeared to be prepubescent. But my development stopped there: I started to get hair under my arms and on my pubes, my breasts grew a little, and then everything came to a halt. I never had a period. The women told me I was lucky, that I wouldn't have the bother of bleeding and the precautions to be taken so as not to stain the mattresses. I'd be spared the tedious monthly task of washing out the rags they had to jam between their legs as best they could, by squeezing together their thigh muscles, since they had nothing to hold them in place, and I wouldn't have to suffer stomach cramps like so many adolescent girls. But I didn't believe them: they nearly all menstruated, and how can you feel privileged not to have something that everyone else has? I felt they were deceiving me.

Back then, I wasn't curious about things, and it didn't occur to me to ask what the point of periods was. Perhaps I was naturally quiet, in any case, the response my rare questions did receive wasn't exactly encouraging. More often than not, the women would sigh and look away, saying 'What use would it be for you to know if we told you?', which made me feel I was disturbing or upsetting them. I had no idea, and I didn't press the matter. It wasn't until much later that Anthea explained to me about periods. She told me that none of the women had much education; they were factory workers, typists or shop assistants – words that had never meant very much to me, and that they weren't much better informed than I was. All the same, when I did find out, I felt they hadn't really made an effort to teach me. I was furious. Anthea said that

I wasn't entirely wrong and tried to explain their reasons. I may come back to this later, if I remember, but at the time I want to write about, I was livid. I felt I was being scorned, as if I was incapable of understanding the answers to the few questions I asked, and I resolved not to take any further interest in the women.

I was surly all the time, but I was unaware of it, because I didn't know the words for describing moods. The women bustled about, busying themselves with the few day-to-day activities but never inviting me to join them. I would crouch down and watch whatever there was to see. On reflection, that was almost nothing. They'd be sitting chatting, or, twice a day, they'd prepare the meal. Gradually, I turned my attention to the guards who paced up and down continually outside our cage. They were always in threes, a few paces apart, observing us, and we generally pretended to ignore their presence, but I grew inquisitive. I noticed that one of them was different: taller, slimmer and, as I realised after a while, younger. That fascinated me. In their more cheerful moments, the women would talk of men and love. They'd giggle and tease me when I asked what was so funny. I went over everything I knew: kisses, which were given on the mouth, embraces, making eyes at someone, playing footsie, which I didn't understand at all, and then came seventh heaven – my goodness! Given that I'd never seen any sky at all and had no idea what the first heaven or any of the others in between were, I didn't dwell on it. They would also complain about the brutality. It hurt, men didn't care about women, they got them pregnant and then walked out, saying, 'How do I know it's mine?' Sometimes the women would declare that it was

no great loss, and at others they would start to cry. But I was destined to remain a virgin. One day, I screwed up the courage to put aside my anger and question Dorothy, the least intimidating of the two elderly women.

'You poor thing!'

And, after a few sighs, she came out with the usual reply:

'What point is there in your knowing, since it can't happen to you?'

'Because I want to know!' I raged, suddenly grasping why it was so important to me.

She couldn't understand why someone would want knowledge that would be of no use to them, and I couldn't get anything out of her. It was certain that I would die untouched, and I wanted to satisfy my curiosity at least. Why were they all so determined to keep silent? I tried to console myself with the thought that it was no secret anyway, because they all shared it. Was it to give it an additional sparkle that they refused to tell me, to give it the lustre of a rare gem? By remaining silent, they were creating a girl who didn't know and who would regard them as the custodians of a treasure. Did they only keep me in ignorance so they could pretend they weren't entirely powerless? They sometimes claimed it was out of modesty, but I could see perfectly well that, among themselves, they had no modesty. They whispered and tittered and were lewd. I would never make love, they would never make love again: perhaps that made us equal and they were trying to console themselves by depriving me of the only thing they could.

Often, in the evening, before falling asleep, I would think about the young guard. I drew on the little I'd been

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able to guess: in another life, he'd have come and sat beside me, he'd have asked me to dance and told me his name. I'd have had a name which I'd have told him, and we'd have talked. Then, if we were attracted to each other, we'd have walked hand in hand. Maybe I wouldn't have found him interesting: he was the only one of our six jailers who wasn't old and decrepit, and I was probably indulgent because I'd never met any other young men. I tried to imagine our conversation, in a past that I hadn't known: Will it be fine again tomorrow? Have you seen next door's kittens? I hear your aunt's going on holiday ... but I'd never seen kittens and I had absolutely no idea what fine weather might be, which put an end to my reverie. Then I'd think about kissing, imagining the guard's mouth as precisely as I could. It was quite wide, with well-defined, thinnish lips – I didn't like the full lips that some of the women had. I pictured my lips drawing close to his: there was probably something else I needed to know, because I felt nothing in particular.

But then, one evening, instead of falling asleep from the boredom of trying to imagine a kiss that would never happen, I suddenly remembered that the women had spoken of interrogations, saying they were surprised that there'd never been any. I embellished the little they'd said: I imagined the guards coming to fetch one of the women, taking her away screaming and terrified. Sometimes, the woman was never seen again, sometimes she'd be flung back among us in the morning, covered in burns, injured, moaning, and would not always survive. I thought: 'Ha! If there were interrogations, he'd come and get me and I'd leave this room where I've always lived. He'd drag

me along unknown corridors, and then something would happen!'

My mind worked incredibly fast: the boy was propelling me along with seeming dedication to his job, but, once we rounded the corner and were out of sight, he stopped, turned to me, smiled and said: 'Don't be afraid.' And then he took me in his arms and an immense sensation surged through me, an overwhelming eruption, an extraordinary burst of light exploding inside me. I couldn't breathe – and then I breathed again, because it was desperately brief.

After that, my mood changed. I no longer tried to persuade the women to tell me their secrets; I had my own. The eruption proved difficult to achieve. I had to tell myself stories that became increasingly long and complicated but, to my utter dismay, I never experienced that explosion twice in a row, whereas I wished it could have lasted for hours. I wanted to feel that sensation all the time, day and night, swaying deliciously, like the rare patches of grass on the plains caressed by the gentle breeze that blew for days at a time, but which I didn't see until much later.

I now devoted all my time to the task of producing the eruption. I had to invent exceptional circumstances where we found ourselves alone, or at least isolated in the midst of the others, face-to-face, and then, after much agony, I had the exquisite surprise of finding his arms around me. My imagination developed. I had to exercise rigorous discipline, because I couldn't dream up the same story twice: surprise was crucial, as I realised after trying several times to relive the exquisite gesture that had transported me, without feeling the slightest stirring. This was extremely

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difficult because I was simultaneously the inventor of the story, the narrator and the listener awaiting the shock of the unexpected. Thinking back, I'm amazed I managed to overcome so many obstacles! Imagine how fast my imagination had to work to prevent me from knowing what would happen so that I'd be caught unawares! The first time I imagined the interrogation, I'd never made up stories before, I didn't even know it was possible. I was completely swept along by it, marvelling both at such a new activity and at the story itself. Then I soon became adept at it, like a sort of narrative engineer. I could tell if it had begun badly or if it was heading towards an impasse, and could even go back to the beginning to change the course of events. I went so far as to create characters who reappeared regularly, who changed from one story to another, and who became old friends. I was delighted with them, and it is only now that I'm able to read books that I can see they were rather limited.

I needed to invent increasingly complicated stories: I think that deep down something inside me knew what I wanted from them and objected; I had to catch myself off guard. Sometimes I had to keep it up for several hours, to lull my inner audience into a false sense of security so that she'd be entranced by the pleasure of listening, enjoy the story and lower her defences. Then came the magic moment, the boy's gaze, his hand on my shoulder and the rapture that invaded my entire being. After that, I was able to sleep. Perhaps, in stopping the story, I was disappointing an inner listener who preferred the story to the turbulence, which is why she always spun it out and would happily have deprived me in order to prolong her own pleasure.

Sometimes, halfway through, I'd try to argue with her: 'I'm tired, I want to go to sleep, let me get to the eruption, I'll carry on tomorrow.' But it was no use, she wouldn't let herself be fooled.

The women noticed that I'd changed. They observed me for a moment, saw me always sitting down, my knees tucked under, my chin resting on my folded arms, and I suppose I had a vacant stare. I was oblivious, because I wasn't bothered about them any more, and I was surprised when Annabel came to question me.

'What are you doing?'

'Thinking,' I replied.

That puzzled her. She stayed a little longer, waiting for me to say more, then went to convey my reply to the others. They argued for a while, and Annabel returned.

'What about?'

The full force of my anger returned.

'When I asked you what people do when they make love, you wouldn't tell me, and now you expect me to tell you what's going on inside my head! You keep your secrets, if it makes you happy, but don't expect me to tell you mine!'

She frowned and went back to the others. This time, the debate went on longer. I'd never seen them talk at such length and with such seriousness – usually they'd burst out laughing after ten minutes. Apparently I'd provoked something new in their minds. Another woman then stood up and came over to me. It was Dorothy, the eldest and most respected. Even I didn't hate her. She sat down and stared hard at me. Her presence annoyed me greatly because she was interrupting me at a crucial point