

Love makes as many



Beth Underdown

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Centre
for New
Writing



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*For all the staff and volunteers at NT Quarry Bank,
with my heartfelt thanks*

THE LOOMS ARE QUIET, this week. Government orders. There's not enough cotton, not enough boats getting through; so, for once, the looms are still.

'Some folk get on better,' Martha says, 'if they close one eye.'

Martha herself, in fact, could shut both eyes, let the looms run – then open them, and point straight to the one that's at fault. She's been an hour with the new girl, now, but as she tells her what to do with broken ends the girl doesn't look like she's listening: she just stands there, wall-eyed, picking her hands, which are a state to begin with. She's been taken out of the munitions place, and brought back here. Finally, it really will soon be over.

'You'll want an old pair of shoes to change into,' Martha says.

The girl nods, her face all pinched up to convey, no doubt, that she wouldn't mind being elsewhere; any of her own daughters would have got a smack round the mouth, but Martha turns back to the loom. She's put up the nearest pair of blackout blinds, and the rest of the mill floor is in shadow, a muted blue. Shafts of light strike the loom from either side. Fine dust lifts and moves in the late afternoon sun.

She takes a deep breath in. These girls, these girls now, they seem like they're made of something else. First they want this and then they want that, if it isn't stuff to paint their faces it's wage hikes, and if it isn't more money it's votes. The boys that will be coming back, they can vote now if they're nineteen, and that seems right, they fought for it, they should get their say. For women it's thirty.

Last week, she'd heard one of the fellows from the warehouse, leant against the wall in the mill yard. He'd drawn up his phlegm and spat, once; turned to his mate, and said, *my satisfaction is, the ones that has it in't the ones that wanted it*. Loud.

Well, let him. She'll vote the same way William used to – which was it, now? – those ones, anyway. He was a thinker, William, always read the newspaper, tracing downwards with one careful finger. *What this country needs is stability*. That was it.

She's been talking, all this while. How to slip the belt over to the idle wheel. How to release the weights on the beam. But now she stops. What else? Used to be more to it, that's the truth, filling a shuttle and such, but now –

She asks the girl if she's got it, and the girl frowns. 'How d'you keep the dust out of your hair?'

You don't, she says.

She shouldn't have brought her in today. Should have waited while Monday, when it's all running again, shown her as she herself was once shown – silently, with gestures, over the deafening noise of the machines. She should have let her be a bit afraid of it. Let her respect it.

You've got to *earn* it *from* them, that's what these girls don't seem to – she, for instance, has six looms, the most you can. Could have been a piecer, good as anyone. Like Nancy Johnson, say, who started the Co-op up – think of her. An aunt of her William's, or great-aunt, something like that. Anyway, she'd had a husband, but nobody remembers him, do they? No, it's Nancy that did something for this place, but not by pouting and stamping her feet. Nancy Johnson was a *worker*, and now you can feed your little ones without having to walk ten miles over it. The way her chin tilted up. *I can do everything a man can do, and twice as quick, with half the whinging.* That was it.

William said once, quite serious, that he always left a space for Nance Johnson in the polling queue. Said she'd made him promise, when he was a little lad. Honestly, his face. *She said she'd haunt me otherwise.*

'Right then,' she says, now, to the girl, pulling down the blinds. 'Hang on, while I change my shoes.' Haunt him. Oh, that had given her a good laugh. She slips her trashers off, puts them back in the rack beside the others, and takes her time lacing her good boots. The truth is, these days, she can feel her back.

She takes the girl out down the other stairs. The girl is asking about breaks, and she's telling her, when suddenly the girl stops: where the stair turns, just outside the broad shop.

'It's only the narrow shop and the blowing room just now,' she tells her. 'But I reckon, when they start coming back –'

She sees, too late, what the matter is: the rack of trashers, waiting outside the broad shop door.

'Alright, love?' she says, more gently.

The girl doesn't answer, only carries on down, taking care over the pitted steps.

She could bite her tongue. Trouble is, she sees them every day, and so she doesn't see them, any more: the shoes taken off four years since, and left in their rows, each pair coated now in its own thick layer of dust.

The looms are quiet, this year. The mill is closed to visitors, for the refurbishment, but now and then, while he's mending, they might send a few through. This afternoon, it's a small family, all in the compulsory hard hats: two parents, a girl about six. When the machines were going, the kids would get excited by the noise and the long straight alleys, and you had to stop them from running up and down between the looms, and then colliding, and then crying. But with the looms quiet, he's found, the children are quieter too, and as he says hello to the parents, the little girl wanders vaguely away, her hand trailing along the safety fence.

He starts to show the couple how the weavers would have filled the shuttle; these are the old looms, you had to draw the weft through using only your breath - there was a skill to it, he tells them. The little girl lingers a short way off, peering through the bars of the fence, and he remembers he left a gate open further down. The girl moves off again. The looms are dust-sheeted, but he eyes after her a bit, thinking about trapped fingers as he talks. Then she is gone; the mother sees him frown, and apologises, and calls for the girl, and sure enough, as he is finishing, she reappears, meandering slowly back.

He smiles. 'Do you know how it works?' he says. 'Do you want me to show you?'

The girl climbs a bit on the fence, swings on it. 'It's ok,' she says. 'That lady explained it to me.' Off-hand, utterly calm.

She jumps down. The three grown-ups look at one another, and then away at the empty room. The looms crouch silent under their white protective shrouds.

'Which lady, love?' the father says.

BEATRICE CAN'T SEE THE MILL from her bedroom window, for all it's so near: only the fields and trees, and nearer at hand the garden, and in the garden Minnie, lifting the last of the main crop potatoes for

their dinner. The dark bronze top of her head, the quick hunch as she puts the fork in, the twist of effort as she lifts it. Minnie stooping as she sorts through the clod, throwing potatoes into her basket. She shakes the earth from the prongs of the fork; then pauses for a moment, enjoying what must be for her an unusual quiet, with the mill stopped.

Minnie always liked the garden, though never this house. The apprentices slept here, when the mill still kept them; hardly more than children, straight out of Liverpool and so forth. Her father told her once they had often never seen a cow, never seen a buttercup. They didn't mind the mill, he said, but the nights they found too quiet: some would cry, and Minnie says she hears them, though she herself, of course, cannot. But she thinks about them, the apprentices, should she be lying awake at night, feeling rather than hearing the creak as Minnie turns over, somewhere above her head. She thinks about the apprentices, and her brother's children, all grown up now. Two of the boys dead – this year, last year – and now only Alec left, and Helen. And Madge, of course – Madge, just back from France, though of course she was at war before there was ever a war to be at.

Beatrice lets herself stand, just watching, one luxurious minute, for Minnie's hair really is splendid in the lengthening sun. Last night she'd washed it, and let it dry by the fire, in that low, red light the peat gives off, intent on her sewing. These four years they have been making shirts, and also sleeping bags, and pillow slips for the hospitals. Minnie is quicker with her needle, and teases her – *Bea, it's not a Flemish masterpiece* – but then she'll run a thumb down one of her seams, and sigh with admiration, with pleasure. Acres of white calico, brought up from the mill. Two hours' stitching every evening, after dinner: although, she supposes now, soon they might leave off it.

She watches Minnie bend over the fork again, retrieving the pale potatoes from the earth. I am an apprentice, she thinks, at life.

Catching the ghost of herself in the window, she moves away from the glass. Sometimes she'll pass a mirror and be inspired to put her shoulders back, and when that fails, tuck her hair more smoothly behind her ears. But it is all fairly useless – she is now, she supposes,

what she is – though she did have a proposal, once. She'd even told Minnie about him. Such a serious young man. *Marriage*, he'd said to her, *ought to be a meeting of minds*.

Of course, he preferred gentlemen – you could tell that in four seconds flat. Mama had been a great help, for once, quite the opposite of coy, and it was all over soon enough. But it had hurt her, how astonished everyone had been, that someone had asked for her.

Minnie had not been astonished. She had only listened, and nodded, and offered, in return, nothing at all.

She'd caught the white filigree of Minnie's stomach, once, when she walked in on her still dressing. But you can't ask, can you? About the past. Not just straight out like that. Not when it might be sad. She's got parents, in town – she goes back now and then, and Beatrice used to ask about them, until once Minnie smiled, and said, *they like me more when I'm not there*. Quite without self-pity; and Beatrice had known just what she meant. She has always known.

She watches Minnie now, straightening, the basket over her arm, the fork tucked under. Smiling to herself, as she makes her way towards the house, foreshortened, and then out of view. Beatrice thinks of the evening ahead: cottage pie – good, because Minnie will have made it, although one tries this year not to enquire too deeply into the provenance of the mince. After dinner they will sew, and once their eyes give out, they will talk. About nothing. About everything.

Later, as she lies awake, if she is not thinking about the children, she will think about dying. Not worried for herself, of course, but for Minnie. Because what would she do? She couldn't stay here – for Beatrice, naturally, is the occupier. It is her name in the rent book, and now on the voting roll; it is her name everywhere, and where is Minnie? Nowhere except here.

It makes her think of the water wheel, which she was shown one afternoon, churning and churning in the cool dark chamber at the bottom of the mill. One of the mechanics had pointed her over the workings. A nice lad. She only saw it that once, but once you have seen it, you cannot forget it is there. The quiet lap and creak of the turning, and the dark speed of the outside, and the very middle, which hardly seems to move at all.

The last tour group comes through in five minutes. Hardly enough time to get a frock on and go over her notes. She doesn't really need them anymore, but she likes to look at them anyway. It gives her a minute to calm down, sink backwards into the past.

It's an odd place, the Apprentice House, all tripping stairwells and doors at different heights, and so no visitors are allowed to wander between the official tours - although there's always company, because they work in pairs, and as she unlatches the gate she sees her partner already upstairs, looking out. She can't quite make out who it is, but she's already got her dark frock on. Closing the gate behind her, she raises her hand, in greeting, in apology, but the woman in the window doesn't move.

'Suit yourself,' she murmurs, and lets herself into the kitchen: where she finds Neil, in old-fashioned shirt and flat cap, leaning against the stone sink, eating grapes out of a bit of kitchen roll.

'They've fouled the rota up, then,' she says, smiling, shaking her head.

But Neil frowns. 'What are you on about?' he says.

She does the tour, after all, once she's calmed down, in her ordinary clothes, going smoothly over the apprentices' routine, the herbs that were used to cure their ailments, talking about the various runaways. Afterwards, she waits outside while Neil locks up. As they walk to the gate, she makes herself look, just once, half-expecting - but of course, now there is nobody there.

SHE'S COME TO WIND THE CLOCK. Clock still wants winding, even if there's no one here to consult it, this week. She's been winding the mill clock now, every day, for seven months and more.

On the Monday, after he died, after word had got about, she'd gone to Mr Henshall in his office. He'd been to the infirmary, she knew, and then to see the widow, and she could hear him telling one of the overlookers about it, as she waited outside. After a bit, the overlooker came out.

'About Mr Venables -' she'd said to Henshall, around the door.

'Yes? Come in, Emily.'

‘I wondered, sir, if you wished me to wind the clock?’ She’d lowered her gaze. ‘For the time being, I mean.’

John had always said, don’t let Enoch wind it, for goodness sake, unless you want it to be six o’clock till Judgement Day.

Mr Henshall had taken off his glasses; rubbed his nose, looked at her properly. ‘Know how, do you?’

‘He showed me once,’ she’d said.

‘Doesn’t it need a man?’

‘I reckon I’m strong enough, sir,’ she’d said, and then stood, waiting, folding and unfolding her hands.

Mr Henshall had sighed. ‘Yes, thank you, Emily,’ he’d said, at length. ‘That would be very helpful. For the time being.’

Mostly, she’s been doing the winding first thing – she is always early into work. John was always early, too. She’s been at the mill ten years, but he was born here, and already well married by the time she came. So there was never any question – but she’d bring him a cup of tea at the first brew up, wherever he was – in the clock tower, or lying under a loom, or below, where the water wheel is.

‘I wish I worked down here,’ she’d said, once.

‘Why?’

‘I like the smell.’ Breathing it in: oil and river.

‘I don’t notice it,’ he’d said.

But of course he didn’t. It was his own smell.

‘You’re better off up above,’ he’d said then, and put his hand out for a rag, working it around his knuckles. ‘Bit of warmth, bit of light. Like a plant.’

That had made her laugh. ‘A plant?’ She’d looked at him, mock-serious. ‘Not like a rose?’

He’d smiled, slowly. ‘More like a cabbage, I’d say.’ Then one glance, shy. *Of course like a rose.*

She picks up the handle, fits it carefully, and starts to wind. Mr Henshall wasn’t wrong. It’s heavy work: somewhere below there are heavy weights hanging, suspended in air. As the cable shortens, they are lifted, inch by inch.

She knows she’s daft, she knows that very well, and she hopes at least that she didn’t make it obvious, that she kept some sense of her own dignity. Not like Annie, courting now at her age. Their boarder’s brother, no less.

There. That was it.

She removes the handle, but lingers. She's left the winding late today, with the stoppage. Into the little space, October sunlight streams.

His wife's having a plaque up, in the chapel. John was chapel, too, but there was a bit of give to him. He was always quoting scraps of Shakespeare or the Bible and never seeming too exercised about which was which. 'There are more things under the sun,' he'd say, meaningfully: that was one of his favourites.

He'd put his hand out; mutter, 'Ghost's moved my spanner again.'

Once, cradling his tea, she'd said, 'Do you really think there's ghosts?'

He'd sat up slowly, easing his back, paying the question due consideration. 'Some see things. Feel things.' He'd cleared his throat. 'I suppose it's the damp.'

'So you don't believe in them?'

'I wouldn't say that.' A pause. 'There's those that have reason to come back.'

She'd rested her hand on the loom, brushed the dust off it, casual. 'I heard the beamers saying, it's ones who've been killed in the mill, long since. That they hate us, for being alive.'

'Is that so?' he'd said, accepting his mug. 'Perhaps.' A sip. 'But you know, I don't believe it's only hatred makes them come.'

She'd lingered, then, waiting for what he'd say next, but he'd turned back to the loom, frowning slightly. 'Where's that wrench?'

She'd stood quietly, folding and unfolding her hands. 'Maybe they just want to be noticed,' she'd said.

He was here in the tower when it happened, all by himself. A Saturday, late afternoon, short hours. He only came in for winding the clock, that one task.

She'd heard Henshall say that he would have felt a sort of twisting. That he might have shouted – but if he did, the shout brought no one, echoed useless through the quiet mill. He got himself down the back stairs, all that way, to the boiler room, where on any other day Enoch, the other mechanic, would have been stood idling. But that day Enoch was not there. Nobody was there.

Annie had been in a good mood that day. Richard had been round, because when she got in from her walk there was a bunch of daffodils in a

jug on the kitchen table, and she couldn't help herself, she raised her eyebrows at her sister, said, 'Whose garden's he lifted them from?'

Annie smiled, strained, and turned away. A stew was on, and she was half way through wiping round. 'You might *try* and like him,' she'd replied. 'Who says I don't?'

Annie put her cloth down. 'Oh, Em,' she'd said, after a minute. 'We're not all like you.'

She'd gone back to the front step, to untie her shoes. 'Why, what am I like?'

But Annie didn't answer. It was still light, just about, and a few little girls were skipping in the lane. Before she shut the door, she watched them a minute: small, serious, intent. *Raspberry, strawberry, apple-jam-tart, tell me the name of your sweet-heart.*

It was John's wife that found him. She went down to the mill, when he never came home for his tea.

She still doesn't think much to Richard, but what can you do? It makes sense. It'll be a roof over Annie's head. A roof over her own. There are not enough men, now, and too many women. How's that the war office would put it? A surplus. That was it.

On a ledge, there's a bit of pencil, which the clock menders have used to write the dates they've been, and the work done. She picks it up, tries to feel him. She thinks she can. Then she can't. It was his inner workings that failed him, Henshall had said. Only that.

She touches the tip of the pencil to the wall. John would have felt something before, like as not, and more than once, Henshall had said. A pain of some sort, or a weight, but chosen to think it was nothing.

She's talked to more people this afternoon than in the last month put together, so, near closing time, she slips away. Nothing will be locked for a little while, so now here is a breathing space, to sift the too-many things she might say, about this place. To smell the possible frost.

Up the steep bit, and into the walled garden: mellow brick, and the graceful white frame of the glasshouse all along the far side. She wanders nearer, thinking of stepping in. The panels are misted slightly. It would be warm in there - but she stops. Warm, but not solitary,

because there's a woman - hair up, long skirt - standing still, looking up into the pale rafters. Are her eyes closed?

Instantly she feels she's intruding. There's a shop on the other side, it'll be one of the shop workers. But she's standing so still, and her eyes are closed, and she looks - tense, somehow.

She almost turns, to go back briskly the way she came, but that's daft. She takes the handle of the nearest door, and tries it: locked. The handle creaks as she lets it go, but the woman doesn't move at all.

She turns. She'll go in at the doors at the far end. She'll call out a cheery hello, and the woman will turn and smile. She'll be wearing a National Trust badge. They'll both go through into the shop, where there'll be people cashing up, tired, jovial.

The door at the end, when she tries it, opens, and she is hit with a rush of hot air. But the glasshouse, of course, is empty now, and there's only the smell of sun-warmed brick, and the misted panes, and the graceful white frame, the arches repeating all the way down.

MADGE STANDS IN THE LAST BIT OF SUN, tries to feel it fall on her upturned face, warm through the roof of the glasshouse. She has been to see Aunt Beatrice. It's hard work, partly because she cannot hear, and now she's worrying about whether she was brusque, whether Bea thought her rude. Contrite suddenly, she'd ducked in here to see if there were any apricots still, thinking to fill a handkerchief with them perhaps, and take them back down: they are always sharp, but Bea's housekeeper is clever with things like that. But the little tree is bare, the only sign of the fruit the dabs of brown marking the paving stones beneath the branches. She closes her eyes again, and tilts her face up to the sun.

She will be late, she knows, for tea; already the maid will be bringing in the silver pot that tastes of itself, and the cut bread and butter. The butter is more thinly spread, these days, but the tea is still tea - Papa knows someone, in Liverpool. Since she came back, though, she finds she never wants it, even when she's thirsty, even when she's been tramping about. She wants the cocoa they had, in France, drunk from an old tin can. She wants that more, even though out there she hated it, the sudden false sweetness.

She runs her tongue over her teeth. She's been grinding them again. She must stop it somehow. Her tongue pauses at the cracked one. Dunkirk, that was; in the ward – well, the tent, which was all there had been between them and what was happening outside. The men went quite quiet as the bombardment began, and then suddenly one of the other VADs was patting her down for her handkerchief, folding it neatly, twice, three times, and making her bite down. Saying, *if you're alive tomorrow, you shall need your teeth* – and like that, suddenly, she had heard the sound, for until then she had not even known that her teeth were chattering.

Mama will save her plate, she can be sure of that; the bread and butter drying out under a napkin, reproachful. But she can't stand to go back just yet. She has never been fond of the hall, and now – now it's worse. The peacocks crying out, and never when you're braced for it. Her father furious and pretending not to be; her mother diminished and pretending not to be. And Alec. She would have taken on the mill, cheerfully enough, had she been a boy, being the firstborn; as Arthur would have, as Bobby would have. But Alec must have thought he was clear. He is seventeen now, and he wants none of it, you can tell, and no wonder – it must seem like a large, faulty toy, that has belonged to both his brothers before him.

He and Papa argue. Mama gets upset, and then starts in about the servants, trouble with this girl or that. *I wish you'd have a word, Margaret*, she keeps saying, but she hates having a word. Picking a time, lying in wait. She feels awkward, at the hall, that's the truth. Before, her recourse was always to get out of it. She used to love the woods: used to take the girl guides out, camping, shooting things with bows and arrows. Since it will soon be over, she'd thought that she ought to start up again, but this morning, she went into one of the attics to look at the tents, and the smell of canvas had made her tremble.

A noise: she turns quickly, but it is only the head gardener, trundling past with his barrow full of leaves. Through the glass, she nods. He nods. She's hunched up again, shoulders by her ears. She must stop it, somehow.

She shifts her weight onto her other foot, the one from two years ago, when she stood on a nail, out there. Fool thing to do. It had brought her

back, swollen up as far as the ankle, to watch with impatience, then with interest, as it healed. Bodies are different, once you know what's inside them – horrible, miraculous. Arthur had been back with an injury, once, too; then caught it quickly the second time. But it is Bobby who comes back to her at night. Bobby, the middle brother, so sweet when he was small. She has seen too many of his kind of wound, not to rehearse it when she is wakeful. One of the ambulance drivers had taken her from Dunkirk, across to see his grave at Poperinghe. They had hunted about for above an hour in the late afternoon, and found at length what they thought was the spot, but she'd soon suggested they ought to be getting back – pretending to be anxious about the men, when actually she was afraid of the dark coming down.

The sun has gone in. Nearby, the white roses are having one last go. The foot aches. She is supposed to be resting, but she doesn't want to rest. She wants to be useful. The mill is just out of sight: beyond the top of that great chestnut, where her great-great-grandmother used to sit as an old woman, to look down at everything her husband had built. With pride, one assumes. With love. She would always be invoked, or her ghost would, every time she or Helen acted up, as girls: *your great-great-grandmother-who-had-thirteen-children, she never complained*. Think of your great-great-grandmother, and make yourself useful. Which it seems that Helen, at least, has taken to heart.

She doesn't mind Helen's new husband, though you can't talk to him about much. It surprises her, that a man can have been out there and come back so comfortable – though Helen told her, after the honeymoon, that he has dreams, too. That he wakes up shouting. It's hard to believe, though. Guy wants to be an MP, and she can see him as one, in four seconds flat. At the wedding dinner, they had got onto this voting business. She had said to him, I don't see what the significance is, with thirty. If I was not quite grown up before, the last four years have done it. He had looked at her.

'I mean, I'm twenty-six, but I feel a hundred, and I should think Helen does, too.'

She had said that, stoutly, meanly, and the two of them had glanced over at Helen, fairly glowing in her pretty white frock, and in that

moment she'd wanted to spoil it all, make him see that Helen wasn't the same, that they were none of them the same, that he couldn't have now what he might have got before –

But Guy had leaned back, smiling, cradling his glass of wine. 'Oh no, dear girl – it's nothing to do with anything like *that*. It's simply a question of *ratio*.'

She'd put her glass down. Asked him what he meant.

'Well. That you mightn't be more than half,' he'd said, as though the thing were quite sensible.

A moment, and then she'd understood him, and felt a surge of disbelief, felt a surge of anger, that someone had done that mathematics: calculated the number of spinsters, and set it against, oh dear, the number of young men exploded and rotted away, and drawn a line on a graph. All that women might not gain an accidental majority.

She'd realised her mouth was hanging open, but as luck would have it, Guy was not waiting for an answer; for him, the conversation had reached its natural close. A minute later, he was called away to cut the cake. Someone changed the record on the gramophone, and nearby Aunt Bea said, loudly, that though the icing was not real, the marzipan was honestly quite good.

The mill has closed for the day, and he is cutting the grass. It is autumn, crisp, but golden still, and the lawns are coming up enough to need a fortnightly trim. The ride-on mower wants servicing, so he's brought out a small one. He isn't in a hurry. It's been a busyish day, putting spring bulbs in, and there's dirt, as there always is, under his nails, almost under his skin. But it's only muck, and he's contented.

He likes it best here by himself. Half an hour ago he heard the radio crackle as the manager was locking up, and now he's thinking about his dinner – cottage pie, warmed in the microwave – and also rhododendron varieties, what kinds they've tried, what kinds they might try.

A bang on the glass, and he looks up automatically – just a quick sound, it was, as though with the heel of the hand, one of the volunteers wanting to make him look up, so they can wave, or cheerfully flip him the bird. But as he cranes his neck, the many windows of the mill are blank, and it's only now that he sees how dark it's starting to get.

He stops the engine. He is finished anyway. He wheels the silent mower back across the lawn, over which shadows are starting to spread, and puts it away in the big shed in the mill yard. Someone must still be about. One of the interpretation assistants, they've been putting a new exhibition in. Someone must be working late.

He crosses to the mill doors and rattles them, knowing before he does it that they'll be locked. He's really losing the light now. Perhaps he ought to ring somebody, somebody with a key, but somehow he doesn't. Instead, he walks up the hill to his car, and drives home, and warms up his cottage pie, and never says anything to anyone - knowing, really, that there is nobody trapped in the mill. Or nobody, at least, who can be let out again.

JESSIE SITS BY THE MILLPOND, with the weir at her back. She's come down here on purpose: the noise of the water, the constant rush, it settles her down. With the mill stopped all week, the pond is brim-full. She chucks a stone in, watches it lap and settle. Behind her, the weir roars on. All that wasted power.

Everyone is always asking after Fred, but they gird themselves first, ready for a blow to fall. *That's good, that's good*, they say - looking away in relief, as she answers that when she last heard from him, he was well. He's never written much of a letter. She didn't choose him for that. She chose him for his sweetness, his steadiness - though when she'd heard about the engagement, her friend Annie had laughed, and told her she'd gone for dim and dapper. She was only joking, but - and anyway, dapper isn't right. Fred's never smart, his collars are always half-up half-down - but he is certainly handsome. No, not handsome, even. Beautiful.

He was a gardener, before. Once, when they'd just started courting, he'd been mowing the grass over there, down the other side of the river. She'd been on her break, and banged on the glass for him, and spotting her he'd grinned and capered about, until the overlooker had given her a gentle cross word. Fred could be silly, before. Harmlessly silly, and absent-minded, too. She went for her tea at his mum and dad's, once, and he'd come in, boots still on, trailing dirt, and when she told him off he said, *ah, it's only muck*, and his mum had smiled, shrugged.

She chucks another stone. She should go home. But she doesn't want to. She's been a year in that house; since they married, last autumn. Of course he'd been different, you'd expect that. Tired. Though they've a big garden, and most of his leave, after the wedding, he'd spent digging. When dinner was ready, she'd shout for him from the back step, and he'd come in, taking his boots off, and leaving them at the door. Even the night it was coming on to rain he'd left them outside, to get cold and stay damp. But she said nothing – knowing that those boots might have trodden in something other than muck. Something worse. Across the kitchen table, plates pushed aside, she'd asked him, just once, what is it like? And he'd said, it's loud.

This past spring, daffodils had come up in the garden, a great thick row like a promise, but then they'd fallen back. After that, nothing.

Already at the wedding, some people were saying it had gone on too long, that it was old men who wouldn't sign a peace, that they were only at it to prove a point, now. She's always read the newspapers. Across the kitchen table, she'd given him the ins and outs of it, until he'd said, 'Jessie, you know I'm not for politics,' but she'd kept on – *Don't you resent it?* – until he'd slammed his fork down, and said, 'For fuck's sake, Jessie.'

He'd never had a mouth on him before. She'd told her mam about it. 'I've no sympathy, our Jess,' she'd said. 'You never know when to say when.' She'd cried then, and her mum had fussed a bit and stroked her head. 'It won't help him, resenting things, will it?' She'd calmed down, after a while, and they'd talked about it all again, pointlessly. The war. When it would be over. She'd said, 'I've never lived by myself before,' and that had made her cry a second time. Her mum had tapped her hand. Said, 'Oh, love. When it comes to men, a woman's always by herself.'

They'd patched it up, before he'd gone back. Course they had. And since then she's had six three-line letters, and people pausing before they ask after him, and people telling her she's lucky. She's got a house, and it's a good house. Fred is still alive. Still alive, she reminds herself, when there's others with no husband. With a baby and no husband; though she'd done nothing to prevent anything. She'd even missed, twice, before Christmas; started carrying herself more carefully, scared that even the noise of the looms could jog it out of her. Knowing at the same time

that she was losing weight, not gaining, and then she'd got her monthly again. Could have been nothing.

Since then, until this stoppage, she's been working all she can. Rushing through her piece-work, saving, although she doesn't know what for. She's hated this week off. The house is too quiet. Tried playing the piano, but it sounds strange, now, and they don't need her any more at the hospital, some of the men are starting to get discharged. It really will soon be done.

The letter's in her pocket, still, but she doesn't take it out. Came yesterday, and already she knows it by heart. When people ask after Fred at chapel tomorrow, she can still say, oh, he was well when I heard from him last: because the letter is from a friend of his. Someone in his regiment. His nerves, the letter says. She knows that sometimes this means gas; sometimes it means – well, in your head. She had a dream last night, and Fred was there, and he had a face that was like his face, but it wasn't his face. He'd turned to her and said, you should be grateful. But gratitude is like other things; you either feel it, or you don't.

It'll be getting dark, soon. The mill clock strikes, a lonely sound. Stiff, cold, she picks herself up, and takes herself home.



Love makes as many was developed during a writer's residency at NT Quarry Bank, as part of the 2018 Lost Voices program, marking the centenary of partial women's suffrage. For a woman to gain the vote in 1918, she had to be over the age of thirty, and be (or be married to) the head tenant of a rateable property. These provisions meant that women only made up around 40% of the electorate that year.

Love makes as many follows five women living and working around Quarry Bank mill during the cotton shortage of October 1918. The First World War will end in a fortnight, with a general election following soon afterwards. Two of these five women are eligible to vote in that election; three are not. Three of the women are mill workers, about whom few facts remain to us, while two are part of the Greg family, who owned Quarry Bank, and about whom much more detail survives. The interspersing stories, set in 2018, are based on real uncanny experiences which National Trust staff and volunteers were able to share from their time at Quarry Bank.

Martha Gratrix is one of only a dozen female mill workers to gain the vote at Quarry Bank in 1918. Martha is a 55-year-old widow, and lives at Oak Cottages, very close to the mill. Her story contains a memory of Nancy Johnson, who was instrumental in setting up the Co-operative shop at Quarry Bank.

Beatrice Greg is part of the family who own Quarry Bank. At 58, she is eligible to vote, as, like Martha, she is head tenant of her household, the mill's old apprentice house. She has been living there eight years, in the company of her housekeeper, Minnie Longworth. Before entering Beatrice's employment, Minnie had a son, Jack, born out of wedlock after an affair with a Canadian sea captain - but Minnie will not tell Beatrice about Jack until after his early death. When Minnie dies herself, in twenty years' time, Beatrice will follow just a month later. The local newspaper will quote the Greg family's statement that the pair had been devoted to one another for nearly thirty years, and that the one death had certainly hastened the other.

Emily Mottishead is a mill worker at Quarry Bank. She is not eligible to vote in 1918; although old enough, at 41, she is neither a head tenant, nor married to one - nor will she ever be. She lives at Styal Green, in her father's house, and soon she will move in with her sister and her sister's new husband. Emily's story was inspired by some graffiti, which can still be seen in the mill clock tower, pencilled in an unknown hand. It reads: *J. Venables died Sunday March 17th 1918 at Manchester Infirmary. Buried March 21st Wilmslow Cemetery. Taken ill Saturday noon at the mill. Found in boiler house, about 5.30pm, March 16th*

Madge (Margaret) Greg is Beatrice Greg's niece. At 26, she is too young to vote in 1918. Recently returned from work as a VAD in France, she will remain at Quarry Bank for a few months, before departing to undertake medical training in London. After qualifying as a surgeon, she will eventually marry another doctor, becoming stepmother to his existing children. Madge will never give birth to children of her own, but will continue to work as a doctor throughout her married life.

Jessie Morton is a mill worker at Quarry Bank. At 28, she is too young to be eligible to vote in 1918. Born Jessie Barnshaw, she grew up at Oak Cottages, but moved to a larger house after her marriage to Fred Morton, a gardener, while he was on leave from active service in autumn 1917. Fred's name can be found on a list of 'absent voters' from the December 1918 general election, indicating that by that date he had still not returned home from the war.



