

MAD HATTER



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Amanda Hale



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*You return to that earlier time armed with the present,
and no matter how dark that world was, you do not leave
it unlit. You take your adult self with you. It is not to be
a reliving, but a rewatching.*

—MICHAEL ONDAATJE, *Warlight*

*To all those loving women who cooked, cleaned, kept house,
cared for us children and taught us to read:
Mrs. Fern, Lydia Hope, Mrs. Ward, Mary Simpson, Miss Dixon,
Amy Barrowdale, Vera, Elsie, the Nicoles, and Kati Kunz.*

DISCLAIMER

I have followed as closely as possible the events as they are known. However, this is a work of fiction and I have freely invented scenes, dialogue, and motivations, filling in the blanks in the historical record where necessary. In some cases details have been changed or imagined to serve the purpose of the narrative. Scenes involving actual persons, living or dead, are written with absolute respect for those people's roles and involvement in historical events.

The head of our family was missing, drowned they said, and I, a slow but persistent swimmer and a believer in magic, spent my childhood diving for him, over and over, coming up gasping for air, not knowing whom I sought.

I lived in his body before I became myself. I was with him when he was arrested; I was with him in the holding stall, and in his cell, adrift in that lonely sea of which I still dream—a fathomless expanse without a shore. This thrills and terrifies me in equal parts, a creature suspended, who must imagine her world.

I was with him at Ascot camp and at Latchmere; and when they let him out on overnight leave I made my escape. A swimmer from the outset, I entered another body and took root there, throbbing with the blood I fed on—blood that made me who I am—until I was expelled into this world, through which I have moved for fifty-seven years, pulsing to the rhythm of my mother's heart.

Yet a part of me remains with him in that prison cell, observing and recording. He lives in me—as I lived in him—more insistent perhaps than for the rest of my siblings, though each one of us is, in our own way, haunted by the enigma of that man.

Imagine a day—sun rising on a palimpsest of shadows so dense and peopled that not even its noontime brilliance can dispel the throng. We remain, my father and I, entwined in shadow. His presence lingers like the perfume of a woman long after she has left the room. This perfume is memory—my memory of unconditional love for a man I scarcely knew.

ONE



The Home Secretary today has power to detain on suspicion anybody, from the Archbishop of Canterbury to the humblest labourer in the land. These are powers which would make Himmler green with envy.

—COMMANDER ROBERT BOWER, M.P.,
in the House of Commons.

Chapter One

LIEBESTRAUM: JUNE 4TH, 1940



IMAGINE A DAY, a warm summer's day. Christopher is playing with his children in the back garden. He is just throwing the ball to Jimmy as a man rounds the corner and strides down the path, crushing fallen wisteria blossoms under thick-soled shoes. Cynthia happens to glance from the upstairs window of her bedroom. She sees the man and immediately notes that he is wearing one of the wide-brimmed fedoras currently in vogue—a hat like Christopher's—brown with a darker matching band, made of soft rabbit fur, creased with a teardrop crown. She always recognizes a Brooke hat and feels a flush of pride to have married into the family. She hears the low hum of bees buzzing round tangled clumps of blossom still covering the south wall of their house. Her brow furrows slightly as she wonders who the stranger could be, but her heart is full and she begins to sing softly: *"I'll never smile again until I smile at you ..."*

She loves the popular songs, this one newly released by Tommy Dorsey and his band. She turns away from the window as Christopher begins to converse with the man, and she waltzes around the room in her own embrace, her bare arms cradling her body. As she reaches the open door the smell of roast meat reminds her that she must see to the lunch; her housekeeper has joined the war effort. She wonders if she should set an extra place for Christopher's friend. She runs back to smooth the counterpane on her bed—Chris has already done his—he's

such a tidy man, so much attention to detail, she thinks with an edge of irritation. Then she smiles and hurries downstairs.

Christopher goes quietly, first taking the children inside—Jimmy gasping with upset because their game of catch has been interrupted—putting them in the charge of their mother while he packs an overnight bag. Pyjamas, socks, underwear, a clean shirt, a hand towel, toothbrush and shaving kit. Cynthia sets the children up with colouring books and crayons at the kitchen table and runs upstairs to hover at her husband's side. He tries to reassure her, telling her that he is confident of his return within a day or two, but she holds onto him, her nails digging into the soft flank of his palm. Before they go downstairs he kisses her, taking from her the fragrance of her perfume. Arpège by Lanvin clings to his shoulder during the long journey to Liverpool.

He removes his hat for the journey, placing it on his lap, and tries to strike up a conversation with the Detective-Inspector, but the man is uncommunicative. In fact, he is rather brusque, even rude, Christopher thinks. No matter. He contents himself with a study of the passing scenery. The rolling hills of Cheshire give way to an industrialized cityscape as the driver turns westwards towards the market town of Warrington where the Mersey River marks the border between Cheshire and Lancashire with its textile and steel mills, breweries and factories. The sun shines through the clouds creating brilliant rays of light evocative of Blake's water colours, but the city of Liverpool with its tall Victorian buildings obliterates the vision until their car emerges on the other side, in suburban Walton.

The gates of Walton Gaol are flanked by massive stone pillars. The gates open and their car passes through and purrs to a halt in front of a long, low building. Christopher is told to get out. The Detective-Inspector, still wearing his hat, accompanies him into the building, where he is registered, then handed over to a prison guard, who escorts him down a long corridor to a metal door at the end. The guard pauses a moment, searching amongst the many keys hanging from his belt, then he unlocks and throws open the door.

As Christopher steps out onto the gravel path he looks up at a

cloudless blue sky. It is a short distance to the Reception building where he is passed to a prison officer in a white coat who tells him to deposit his possessions on the counter. He hands over his watch, keys, wedding ring, wallet, a handkerchief, and a roll of mint imperials. The officer places them in a brown envelope and writes, *Christopher James Brooke*, followed by a number. He is asked to surrender his hat, coat and overnight bag, which he does, placing them on the counter. Christopher looks directly into the man's eyes. "One day you will feel ashamed," he says, "that you took part in the imprisonment of men who seek only to avoid war." The officer averts his eyes as he swings the bag over the counter.

Christopher is led down a corridor lined with what appear to be storage lockers, or even the stalls of a public lavatory. To his amazement he is pushed into one of these and locked in. There's no room to move. He is forced to sit bolt upright on a narrow wooden plank. He twists his neck and looks up. There's no ventilation. He calls out, asks how long he is to stay there, what is to happen, but there is no reply. He hears footsteps pacing at the end of the corridor and calls out again. He feels short of breath in this fetid box and remembers a BBC program he heard on the wireless about live burials and how common they were until the advance of medical science. Instructions had been given on how to survive such a situation by breathing steadily and avoiding panic or shouting, so he decides to remain silent and await his release, of which he still feels confident.

But his hunger has begun. He tries not to think of the Sunday lunch Cynthia had been cooking in the oven. The thought of crisply roasted meat with tangy mint sauce causes him to salivate and swallow rapidly and repeatedly to avoid choking. The leg of lamb had been costly, purchased fresh from the farm behind his house. Meat rationing had been enforced three months ago to cut down on the amount of food brought in from abroad as German submarines started attacking British supply ships. Just one more consequence of the government's foolish decision to go to war, Christopher thinks as he lapses into a kind of half sleep from which he is roused by a rattling of padlocks.

A guard prods him with a group of fellow detainees towards yet

another building where they are stripped of their clothing and directed to a single shower equipped with a dirt-veined bar of carbolic soap. Christopher steps in first and turns on the hot tap which seems to produce only cold water. He begins to scrub himself vigorously—he feels soiled since entering this place—but his efforts are cut short when he is yanked from the bath-house to be medically examined by another white-coated man, who pushes roughly, first into his mouth and then his anus, with a gloved finger.

Finally, bereft of everything that has identified them, the men are given each a mug of cocoa and a hunk of dry bread and are allowed to stand for a moment while they chew hungrily. They wear coarse grey prison shirts and loose trousers made from material that scratches the skin. The guards, Christopher notes, are armed with pistols in hip-holsters, while some have rifles slung over their shoulders. The realization dawns on him in flickers of delayed reaction, that this is not a scene from a film but a real situation to which he himself is subject. Everything is suddenly in the present tense.

The men are taken to their cells on the top landing four floors up, and Christopher notes on the way the nets that span each of the landings. For a moment he thinks himself at Bellevue Circus with his parents and Alice, watching the trapeze artists fly through the air, always a safety net beneath them. He hears gates clanging one after another as the men are locked up, and then it is he who is being pushed into a cell and locked in as the remaining prisoners march on.

He stands a moment, taking stock, then he begins to pace—fourteen feet by eight—he looks up, gauges about twelve feet. He inhales deeply, forcing his ribs outwards, flared into the barrel of his broad chest. The air has a mouldy, mushroomy smell; something rank and sour about it. The floor is thick with grime and the ceiling and walls are be-dewed with flaking distemper, white-washed from ceiling to shoulder height, continuing down in green, speckled with black mould. There is a small window high up, almost opaque with its coagulation of soot and pigeon excrement, but Christopher detects a patch of blue and is unaccountably pierced, his throat swelling with the threat of tears. His impulse to control is immediate, but he cannot quell an insistent

memory of bluebell-carpeted woods; he and Alice picking bunches of the slippery-stemmed soldiers of spring for their mother; how she dunked them in pale vases that revealed their drinking and quivering.

He sees a Bible lying on the shelf above a rickety wooden table, government issue with a faded burgundy cover. He drags the table to the window and climbs up. From there he can see through the bars a blackened brick building and beyond that something that could be a patch of green grass, a football field perhaps or a cricket pitch. He lifts his arm to touch the ceiling but quickly withdraws it when flakes of distemper fall on his face and shoulders. He brushes them off and looks down at the bed with its thin mattress, canvas sheet, grey blanket folded at the foot, and a clay-coloured pillow of coarse material.

He climbs down from the table and takes the few steps necessary to reach his bed. He lies down on the wooden bed-board, his hands cradling the back of his head, and tries to float above his feeling of desolation, but he is overcome, a small child again, taken in the night by a power much greater than him. When the metal grating scrapes open and a tin mug is pushed through, he jumps up. It is a full measure of tea that gives warmth to his cupped hands. He drags the chair over to his table, sits, and drinks thirstily. When he's drained his mug, and has massaged some of its warmth into his hands, he sits erect at the table and lets his fingers play from memory Franz Liszt's *Liebestraum*.

Chapter Two

MARY BYRNE SPEAKS



July 1940

*The year was nineteen thirty-nine,
the sky was full of lead.
Hitler was headed for Poland,
and Paddy for Holyhead.*

—POPULAR IRISH SONG

Mary Byrne saw me in my father's palm when I was barely conceived, and she saw my father in mine long after he was lost to us. Mary has her own story, and without it my story would never have been told.

IT WAS MY Da advised me to get out of Ireland. Mam was worn out with the raising of us all. My sisters and brothers were gone and I was the last one left at home, except for Patrick who is the youngest and must help with the farm. I was expected to marry like my sisters, but all the good looks had been used up by the time I arrived.

“You’ll never find a man here, especially not with this war on,” Da said. “And I’ll wager it’s not the convent you’re wanting. Go across the water and make a life for yourself, Máire. You’re a brown bunny, darker than the rest, but they’ll not notice over there.”

Is there something of the tinker in me, the travelling people? I wondered.

“You’re destined to cross the water,” he said, looking into my

palm. “It’s written there, you see?” I’ll admit I felt the pull of England, as though something was waiting for me there, but I could never have guessed at it, even with what I’d inherited from my Nana on Da’s side. *An da shealladh*. My sisters got the beauty, but I had the Sight, and I was to have the adventure too, though I wept the day I left. “You’re best gone,” Mam said, “with the TB epidemic and all.”

I took the boat from Dun Laoghaire, south of Dublin, and slept that first night in a room the size of a cupboard, near the wharf where we docked at Holyhead. Next day I took the bus to Bangor, bought a paper and searched through the *Help Wanted* columns. My dream was to become a switchboard operator, but there was no call for that in the paper, so I was out of luck. There was a few openings for housekeepers and nannies, but I didn’t bother with the ones requiring references. I was in a hurry to find a place before my money ran out, and she was desperate too, as it turned out.

“I need a housekeeper,” she said. “Can you cook?”

Bless you, Mam, for teaching me! It’s been my saving grace.

She told me to take the bus to Chester right away and she’d come to meet me with her motor-car.

It was July of 1940 when I started working for her, and I soon found out it was more than housekeeping and cooking. There were three children to look after. I’d grown up looking after our Patrick who had the devil in him, and Mam too tired to be bothered, so I was used to it, and I didn’t mind, though the lady of the house—Mrs. Brooke I was to call her—expected a lot from me, but then I thought, that must be how it is in service. It’s all new to me so who am I to know? I think myself lucky to have a job in England. That’s how I talked to myself alone in my room at night before I fell asleep—the first room all to myself which should have been a wonder, and I wrote home about it, but I didn’t tell them how lonely I felt in that room.

The children were my only comfort in those early days, Jimmy and Birdie especially. He was four years old, and Birdie was the baby at two. Charlotte, the firstborn, was six years old, and already a little mother to her siblings. With the war on and their father away they were bound to be needing more love than usual, but there was something strange

about those children, something that troubled me and which I came to understand as time went on.

There was a circle of grass in the back garden, taller and greener than the rest, and I told them about the fairy circles all over the fields surrounding our farm in County Cavan where the grasses grow higher to make a place for the fairies to dance. Next thing you know I see them circling, clustered together in the back garden. They seemed so alone in their little group, the way children have of separating themselves from the adult world, Charlotte bent down, whispering to Birdie, and Jimmy smirking and scuffing his shoe in the grass. Then they each stretched out their arms, joined hands and began walking—not dancing as you’d expect of children—but walking with slow deliberate steps, and all the while their lips moving. I was curious to know what they were saying, so I opened the nursery window upstairs where I was making the beds, and this is what I heard.

“Come back fairies, come back soon, hold the circle under the moon ...”

And here they all looked up at the sickle of a new moon hanging in the daylight sky, then Charlotte’s voice like a bell—“We gather here to summon you, please come back to one three two.”

That was the number of their house—132 Chester Road. The children raised their arms, hands still joined, faces staring up into the sky and, just as suddenly, they dropped them all together and bent over, hair flopping on the grass. Birdie started jumping up and down shouting: “One three two, one three two!”

It’s too much for her, I thought, the seriousness of it. She’s a wild unruly child and will have to be tempered someday.

Chapter Three

A FIREBALL



Walton Gaol—July 1940

“I’M HERE TO see my husband, Christopher James Brooke.”
Cynthia stood defiantly before the uniformed man who sat behind his desk cradling a mug of tea. He raised his eyebrows and appraised her briefly, then turned his back, revealing a line of dandruff along his collar, and addressed an elderly man sitting at a desk facing the back wall of the cramped office.

“Brooke file,” he barked at the old fellow who bent to a filing cabinet, his fingers crawling like a half-dead spider over the grubby folders.

“Ere we are, Mr. Sharples,” the old man said, proffering a slim folder, which Sharples flipped open as he swivelled to face Cynthia. He made a show of studying the file and shuffling the few papers within it before he looked up, pausing even then.

“There’ll be no visit today,” he said finally, snapping the file shut, and leaned back in his chair with an air of satisfaction.

“Why not? I telephoned last week and you said ...”

“The prisoner’s been transferred.”

“But that’s impossible! You said quite clearly, Tuesday at ten fifteen ...”

“Not me.” He wagged his finger. “You didn’t speak to me.”

“Well ... whoever it was.” She tossed her head impatiently. “I must see my husband. I’ve driven a long way.”

“Nice for some as has cars.”

“That’s beside the point. Christopher Brooke is my husband and you’re holding him illegally.”

“He’s not here.” Sharples sniffed with an air of finality.

“Well, where is he?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.” He paused, enjoying his command of the situation, and then, just as Cynthia opened her mouth to speak, he scooped her. “Classified information. You’ll have to make an application to ...”

“For God’s sake, you must tell me where he is! He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“I must caution you, madam ...”

“I won’t stand for it! I want to speak to your superior.”

Cynthia’s cheeks flushed, and her dark eyes glistened as Sharples pursed his lips and, moving with a deliberate lassitude, pulled a sheet of paper from a large brown envelope on his desk, circled a number in red pencil, folded the paper and placed it on the sill between them.

“What’s this?” she snapped.

Sharples leaned back with folded arms. “That there is the telephone number of the person you need to talk to,” he said, slow and deliberate.

“This is no way for the British government to treat its own people. My husband is a gentleman. He’s a director of Brooke’s Hatters. I demand to know where he is!”

Sharples’ hand rose, poised in a gesture between caution and a slap.

“Calm down, my lady, or I’ll have to call a female warden.”

“How dare you threaten me! What is my husband charged with? Tell me that. But you can’t, can you, because he’s not guilty of anything. You can’t hold him without a charge.”

The old clerk had turned from the back wall, his neck twisted to observe the scene. A teacup rattled in a saucer held in his trembling hand. He raised the cup to his lips, watching Cynthia as he slurped a noisy mouthful. She saw him staring at her over his spectacles, and felt humiliated by her audience.

“You haven’t heard the last of me. My father will be making a formal complaint to the Governor of this gaol.”

With that she turned and walked away before they could see her

tears welling. The click of her heels echoed down the slate-tiled corridor, and there was a final slam as she banged the door behind her.

“She’s a fireball,” the old man croaked, breaking into a phlegmy cough.

“Oh yes, and much good it’ll do ’er,” Sharples drawled.

Chapter Four

OFF TO ASCOT



Walton Gaol—July 1940

Floating in darkness, I feel a vibration spiralling through my body in circles of sensation; I am held by a desire that propels me on a hurtling journey to a place where I might hear those sounds.

CHRISTOPHER WAKES STARTLED by the clang of metal juddering through his body, leaving a sick feeling in his throat and stomach. He suffers that temporary disconnection of not knowing where he is, searching with bleary eyes for something familiar—Cynthia’s discarded clothing on the corner chair, the rose-patterned curtains of their bedroom—then he hears a tin plate sliding into place, a cup sloping liquid, another clang as the metal flap drops. He sits up and swings his long legs off the bed, in two strides he is there, hunkered down, lifting the flap, grasping his plate and cup. Porridge, every morning, thin, grey and lumpy, already congealed around a spoon so soft it would bend if you gripped it hard. He wolfs it down but doesn’t drink the tea; there’s bromide in it.

At first he’d been tempted to huddle on his cot and give in to the sedative, but it was forbidden to use your bed between 7 a.m. and 4 p.m. so he’d had to fight his tiredness. Now it is thirst he must fight, with his tongue furred in his mouth, thick with the silence of the long night. He tosses the tea into his toilet bucket and fills the cup with water from the sink. The taste is foul, and later there will be knife-stabbing pains and diarrhoea.

He begins his daily pacing, back and forth, counting his steps, estimating the miles that accumulate with the hours and days and weeks. They have only half an hour in the prison yard each day, not enough for a man accustomed to the vigorous exercise of tennis, boxing, cricket and swimming. More than anything he misses ballroom dancing, with the lightness of a woman held in his arms. Before his marriage he had frequented the dance halls of Manchester and won prizes for his foxtrot and quickstep.

In his determination to keep himself fit he has done step-ups on the rickety chair until it collapsed under his diminishing weight. He has lain face down on the floor and done push-ups until his shoulders and arms ached. Now his limbs have begun to twitch; his muscles cramp in the night, waking him in agony so that he has to grit his teeth and pace the cell until the spasms pass. Then he lies there, afraid to sleep, his feet hanging over the end of the bed as he feels his flesh trying to crawl out of his skin. He is losing strength, losing muscle mass from lack of nutrition.

During the first weeks of his imprisonment Christopher has made daily requests to speak with a solicitor. He has asked for permission to telephone his wife, to speak with someone, anyone who can enlighten him about his situation and tell him what is to become of him. Though he has been in Walton Gaol far longer than he had anticipated, and with no explanation of how exactly he is charged, he still believes it to be temporary. He is keeping a penciled record of the days on the Bible flyleaf, striking a line through the completion of each week. He is a patient man filled with the conviction that he will soon be home again in the bosom of his family.

When shadows gather on the darkening walls of his cell he busies himself with routine activity, placing and aligning his shoes under the bed, squaring his Bible on the shelf, folding and refolding his clothes, preparing for the night. But as he lies down on his wooden bed-board it is impossible to avoid a creeping feeling of desolation. There is no music, no children's voices, no laughter, only the rattling of the warder's keys against his belt buckle as he makes his rounds, peering through the door slots.

Christopher tries to summon Schubert's C minor impromptu with

its loud opening chord followed by a four-bar statement of theme repeated in haunting and inventive variations and changes of harmony. His fingers move on the rough grey blanket, but the day's thoughts intrude, crowding his head with rumours snatched in whispers during the brief exercise period in the prison yard. Yesterday there had been an unexpected medical inspection and instantly a rumour had swept through the prison that they were all going to be shipped to Canada, a terrifying prospect given the news of the *Arandora Star*, sunk on the 2nd of July by a German U-boat off the coast of Ireland. The ship had been bound for Canada with a cargo of 1,500 Italian and German internees, many of whom had drowned when British soldiers shot holes in their lifeboats to prevent their escape. Some days it is rumoured they will be transferred to another prison, or to a concentration camp to work alongside Jewish German internees.

One day there had been talk of a mass release, but each night Christopher finds himself lying on the same board in the same cell, waiting for something to happen and fearing what it will be. He prays as his mother taught him to long ago, though he does not kneel. He lies in prayer, eyes closed, praying for his wife and children, praying for his parents, praying for blessed sleep to come and relieve him of the uncertainty of his existence. And when he sleeps he dreams that he is in Cynthia's embrace, pressed against the perfumed softness of her body, and he awakens in dark ecstasy plunged suddenly into such loss that it is like falling from a mountain top.

Jangle of keys, metal inserted, lock turned.

"Movin' on today." Musgrave's cheery voice, his cockney twang.

"Going home?"

"No, mate, you're off to Ascot. Dust off your top 'at. Put your best foot forward."

"Ascot? Is there a prison there? Am I going to have a hearing?"

"Nah. They've converted the winter quarters of Ringling's circus into a camp for you blokes. You'll be rubbing shoulders wiv Jerries and Eyeties. Enemy aliens, the lot o' them. You're not alone, mate."

Christopher runs a hand over his cropped head. "But why Ascot?"

It's so far from my home. It would be a more appropriate journey for you, Musgrave."

"Right enough. *I'm* far from my 'ome because they can do what they want wiv ya if you're not fit for war," Musgrave says, slapping his gammy leg.

"But would you fight?"

"Darn right I would. The Jerries are banging at our front door, mate. They've got France, 'aven't they? Pictures in the paper of those ruddy Krauts marchin' up the Champs Elysees. Now they're fighting us in our own English Channel!"

"But you don't understand, Musgrave. Thousands of young Englishmen will die in this war if we don't ..."

"*You* don't understand, mate! Your sort finks you can talk the 'ind leg off a donkey."

"I'm only trying to tell you ..."

"And I'm telling you we can't let them win or we'll all be talkin' German."

He sees the fear in the guard's eyes, and it silences him.

"I'll be back to take ya to the main gate at eight sharp, alright?" Musgrave says.

The door slams shut with a violence that echoes inside Christopher's head. He stands a moment until his nerves settle, then he begins to prepare for his journey. He can't help thinking of his last visit to Ascot, for the Royal Ascot Races with Cynthia in the first year of their marriage. He remembers her excitement, her shining eyes, and how he had impressed her by recognizing each of the Brooke Toppers—the grey plush hats worn in the royal enclosure, the black ones for the commoners.

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Amanda Hale has published three novels, two collections of linked fictions set in the Cuban town of Baracoa, and two poetry chapbooks. She won the Prism International prize for creative non-fiction for *The Death of Pedro Iván*, and has twice been a finalist for the Relit Fiction award. Her novels and Cuban stories have been translated into Spanish; *Sondeando la sangre* was presented at the 2017 Havana International Book Fair. Hale is the librettist for *Pomegranate*, an opera set in ancient Pompeii, premiered in Toronto in 2019.

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