

My Husband

Dacia Maraini

Translated by

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Clothed in flames and rolling through the sky is
how I felt the night he told me
he had a mistress and with shy pride
slid out a photograph.

...

If it is true we are witnessing the agony of
sexual reasoning in our age
then this man was one of “those original machines”
that pulls libidinal devices into a new transparence.

...

To stay human is to break a limitation.
Like it if you can. Like it if you dare.

—Anne Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*



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My Husband

My husband is blond, has a receding hairline, white teeth and light skin, with big brown freckles. My husband is elegant, dresses with care, and always scents his hair with cologne. He oversees the work of tellers in a bank and earns a good monthly salary.

Whenever my husband speaks I listen carefully. His voice is soft, velvety, and a bit tense. The things he says are always very precise and correct. I've never heard him say anything out of place or foolish.

My husband is loved by his friends and respected by superiors; whenever he wishes he can also be a man of the world. He can sit right in the centre of a circle of people and just talk or discuss things. He defends the truth and checks his friends' enthusiasm, driven as he always is by perfectly good sense.

My husband is a man of class, but he loves practical jokes. Sometimes I find a toad in my bed, or jam in my slippers. Once he even served me a dessert he'd made with a dead mouse inside.

My husband is a stamp collector. Sometimes he steals the neighbours' mail and cuts out the stamps for his collection. He has two albums, thick as phone books, stuffed with valuable stamps. He says some day he'll sell his stamps and with the money he'll build us a house in the country.

In those albums, besides the stamps, my husband keeps new banknotes fresh from the mint. He says that the first of a new issue brings good luck. So he sneaks them from the cash box, slips them into small transparent light blue envelopes, and affixes them to the pages of the album with Scotch tape.

His colleagues think he's very wise and intelligent, so they come to the house to confide in him, ask his advice. They come on Sundays for the most part, and I'm usually the one who answers the door. When I find myself staring at a stuffed and dumb face, eyes rolling nervously around, I know it's one of Mario's colleagues and immediately show him to the living room.

The man follows me down the hall, then hesitates before entering the room, looking around, unsure. If he has been at our house before, he heads with nervous relief toward the reclining chair at the far end of the room, away from the window. If it's his first visit, he waits, standing, hands in pockets till I ask him to take a seat.

Our living room is very dark. The blinds are always down because Mario says light fades the furniture. So, our guests seem a little intimidated or even afraid whenever I open the door that leads from the hallway to the living room.

One man came every Sunday until a while ago. He was small with curly red hairs poking out from under his shirt cuffs. He used to come to talk about his wife, who was sleeping with the bank manager. At first when this red-haired man began to talk about his wife, he got all worked up, punched the furniture, and shouted. He was in a real bind. If he wanted to keep his job at the bank, he had to pretend not to notice what was going on between his wife and the manager. This bothered him to the point that he couldn't eat or sleep.

On one occasion Mario found a way to console him by talking for hours in a soft, persuading voice. Deciding not to go out so as not to interrupt the session, Mario asked the man to stay for dinner three times in a row. During the sessions this friend became peaceful and even regained a rosy complexion where before he'd been pale and prone to fits of anger.

"He still has some traces of sadness in his eyes, but I'll get rid of them," said Mario. "Make us some good coffee, Marcella. I want him to feel like a new man when he leaves here."

Mario convinced him (his theories were so beautiful that I myself was mesmerized) that the bank manager is a superior being, something of an angel.

"Can an angel be accused of meddling in human affairs?"

"No. But what if he isn't really an angel?"

"Come now, after all our discussions, after all the time we've spent analyzing him and his qualities that are anything but human... I thought you were convinced."

"I am. But sometimes I have doubts...."

"Weak men have doubts, a strong man doesn't. He acts in harmony with himself; his heart, his head, his liver. Even his intestines must follow his actions. Are you convinced?"

"I guess so."

"Good. I'll ask you again: can an angel upset human affairs?"

"No, of course not."

"In fact an angel is an angel. He can only do good. Wherever he descends only happiness and good can result for us."

"He may be an angel, but my wife is no angel."

"Your wife is not an angel, all right, but her relations with an angel can certainly help make her better, more pure and pleasant."

"My wife isn't pleasant."

"She isn't now, but she could become pleasant. Being close to a pleasant man her character will lose its moral and intellectual impurities. Little by little she'll grow out of her weaknesses and you yourself will hardly recognize her. She'll be like a new woman."

"But I married her. As a matter of fact, it's enough for me if she's the way she was when I married her."

"You disappoint me, Carlo. You don't love the good as much as I thought you did. Instead you're attracted to evil, chaos, and darkness."

"That's not true, I swear."

"Well then, listen to me. Tomorrow you'll start keeping an eye on our manager. Try to stay as close to him as possible, pay attention to the sound of his voice, notice how he walks, and moves, how he bends over the desks stacked with papers. If you can strip this veil of indifference and passivity from your eyes, if you can see with your heart, you'll discover his angelic nature."

"I've watched him lots of times, but I've never noticed anything special about him."

"That's because like your other colleagues you are stained with evil; you know how stupid and vulgar they are. To them a manager is just a manager, a cashier just a cashier, and a mailman nothing more than a mailman. For them only appearances matter. Nothing exists beyond appearances."

"It's true they're stupid. All they do with their time is tell dirty jokes and criticize clients."

"See, you notice it too. That means you're different from them, you're better. You're already seeing their behaviour for what it is. And soon it'll be quite clear to you that just as our colleagues are animals, our manager is a noble and pure spirit. Then it will seem perfectly natural to you that

"Do you know what the Romans did to thieves?"

"No."

"They would cut off the hand that stole."

"No! Why?"

"To punish them. If your hand doesn't know how to obey your will, then lop it off. That's what the Bible says, and I think that's the only solution."

More and more I'm convinced Mario possesses the attributes of a magician. Just as if he were the high priest of some terrible, archaic religion, he feels neither pity nor doubt. And his self-assurance is so contagious that in the end everybody does what he orders.

Mario convinced the young man that in order to get rid of his obsession for good, he'd have to cut off his hand.

This morning they both left very early to go to a friend's sawmill. There, while Mario looks on, the dark young man will instantly cut his own hand off with one spin of the saw. Afterwards, they'll come back here for coffee.

That's what they told me, but I think the young man will need bandages and sedatives rather than coffee. I've made up a bed on the couch in the living room where he usually sits. On the glass table I've placed some pain killers, bandages, and a glass of cognac.

The most beautiful sight will be Mario's satisfied face—the happy face of a man who's done his true civic duty.



most acclaimed writers are women." Of them, he continues, the only one who is "still pressing an overtly feminist agenda is Maraini" (14). Indeed, Maraini's course as a writer continues uninterrupted, as a natural consequence of her human vision: "For me 'feminism' is an awareness: a serious reflection on the concrete existential condition of women, and on the historical, social, political and cultural genesis of such conditions" (Santoro 13). Following Maraini's four decades of studying and writing about the condition of women with passion and compassion, perhaps her favourite author Samuel Beckett would say of her and the women she portrays what he wrote at the conclusion of *Company*: "Numb with the woes of your kind you raise none the less your head from off your hands and open your eyes" (80).

VFG, 2004



Notes

- 1 Maraini often travels outside of Italy and has visited Canada repeatedly, especially on the occasion of the International Festival of Authors at Harbourfront, in Toronto. In 1987 she visited with her noted companion of eighteen years, writer Alberto Moravia, who contributed an introduction to *The Holiday*. At Harbourfront Maraini read from what critics consider her "feminist manifesto," the novel *Woman at War*. On this occasion she was interviewed by Adele Freedman. See also details and schedule of the 1992 Festival in *The Toronto Star*, Sat. 3 October. Throughout this study translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 Maraini in *Contro Roma* (76-77). Unless otherwise indicated, in this afterword all translations from Italian to English are mine.
- 3 Dacia's father had to his credit a number of well-known scholarly publications in anthropology. In addition Maraini writes about her "paternal grandmother—a Polish woman with Irish citizenship who wrote travelogues—her paternal grandfather—a sculptor who wrote on art and aesthetics—and her maternal grandfather who published cookbooks and works of philosophy" (Lazzaro-Weis, 216).
- 4 Santoro 13.
- 5 In Centocelle, a depressed area of Rome, Maraini helped young women set up and run theatre groups with a view to encouraging the growth of "feminist culture in Italy" (Lepschy, 211). From her earliest plays—*Cuore di mamma* (Heart of a Mother), *La donna perfetta* (The Perfect Woman), and *Il cuore di una vergine* (The Heart of a Virgin)—to the more recent *Delitto* (Murder), and *Veronica, meretrice e scrittrice* (*Veronica Franco, Courtesan and Poet*), Maraini addresses personal and social issues of central importance to

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