

Maggie's Boy

They're playing a Jimmy Shand record on the wireless and my foot's tapping away against the fender. But this evening my thoughts are somewhere else entirely. Did he – and I don't mean Jimmy Shand – did he really come to see me in my wee house today, or was that all a dream? Have I been a silly woman and tried to turn my hopes into reality? Duncan says I imagine things and I suppose I do, sometimes. It comes of living by yourself; it does funny things to your mind.

This morning, quite early – maybe about seven – I was on the road that runs past my cottage, wondering what on earth I was doing out there in the mist. The road seemed to come out of nowhere and then disappear the other way into nowhere. Come to think of it, that's where I am here - in the middle of nowhere. My cottage sits all on its own, up against the road. It was built long ago, of heavy grey stone, built to last forever.

When I went back indoors I found I'd already raked out the grate and spread the ashes in the yard; I've been filling in the worst of the puddles – hens can turn a place into a muddy swamp. I laid the fire and put a match to it. My sitting room has three outside walls, including the one with the chimney in it, and there's just the slate roof on top, so I need to keep a good fire going.

Tomorrow Duncan will be here for the week's eggs. 'Come on, Maggie,' he'll say with that soft smile of his, 'tell me - something's up, I can see it.' And I'll tell him about the visit I had. We can read each other's minds, Duncan and me. We were both five when my Ma took him in. We became brother and sister, and then a bit more.

I'll bring a pot of tea through to the fire and we'll talk about the day - ten years and a month ago it was - when my visitor first came. Brought to my door by fate. I insist on that, whatever Duncan says.

It was February of 1948. A bitterly cold day up here in Inverness, the wind whipping in off the North Sea with a fine, wetting rain in it. Already getting dark at four o'clock. The fire needed banking up so I got to my feet and went to get more wood, wrapping the shawl tight about me.

I saw the boy right away, by the light from the back door; curled up he was, in the angle where the bathroom was added on to the cottage. He had on the green and white stripes of Drumore, the big boarding school. There'd been a few of them past my window earlier - miserable-looking lads, pushing themselves on, making the effort to keep a bit of warmth in their bodies. But this one had given up. He didn't lift his head when I went past him to pick up some split logs from the pile.

'You'd best come in,' I said. I watched him trying to stand up. He looked wretched and I think it was then that I took leave of my senses. 'Come on, my boy, you're home,' I said. I led him through the kitchen to the fire in the sitting room. I put down the logs and took a look at him.

'First we're going to get you out of those wet things,' I said. I peeled off the sports shirt and then I pointed to the flimsy shorts. 'Those will have to come off too.' I went away to fetch a warm blanket.

When I came back he'd done as he was told. I could see the stripes of a caning on his bum. That made me angry, but I didn't say anything. He was shivering so I wrapped him up as quick as I could. Then he began to shake all over, so I put my arms round him and held on tight. I buried my head in the tartan blanket and I started to weep. I wept and I wept, whispering 'my boy, my boy.' There were thirteen years of grief in that hug.

How long we were like that I don't know, but in the end he was still and I sat him down.

'What's your name?' I asked him.

'Sandy.' The voice was almost a whisper.

'Hello Sandy, I'm Margaret.' Why I said that I don't know. I've always been Maggie to everyone.

I warmed up some milk and he took a few sips, gripping the mug with both hands. Then I pulled him up and led him off to my Ma's old room. He barely made it to the bed before he passed out.

I put a hot water bottle in with him and I sat there, watching, holding his hand. My boy had found me and I wasn't going to lose him again. That was all I could think.

I heard Duncan's truck drawing up outside the window. He often dropped in after his day's work. Then he was in the room, looking down at me and the boy, maybe guessing the state I was in. He lifted the stool from Ma's dressing table and sat beside me.

I leaned over the bed. 'Our boy,' I said, stroking his cheek. 'He was freezing out in the yard and I was led there so I should find him.'

Our boy would have looked like this, but I lost him. I was seventeen and I lost him. Only three of us ever knew and only two are alive now. The other one was my Ma. She sent Duncan away, to the Robertsons, to live in and work on their farm. I wasn't myself after that, not for a long time, always searching for what wasn't there, making a nuisance of myself wherever I went. Half the village stopped talking to me. I'd had great plans to go to college but that idea went out the window. It wasn't till my Ma had her accident that I settled down a bit. Had to I suppose; I was on my own now.

I knew one of the Robertson girls would get her claws into Duncan and it was Jeanie, the youngest who caught him. She is the best of them, I'll grant him that. I hear she'd like to know me – she's sent messages - but Duncan doesn't bring her over and I'm thankful for that. He's running the Robertson farm now.

I had lost my lover, and I'd never want anyone else, but he didn't stop being my brother. He still looks out for me like he always did.

We sat there by the bed, the two of us. I was away with the fairies, as my Ma would have said. But Duncan brought me out of it - gently, bless him. He never said: 'Maggie, you can't do this.' He looked at Sandy for a while and then he said: 'By the look of him he wasn't going to make it back to the school and there's no other shelter within a mile of here.' Then he turned and looked at me. 'You saved his life, Maggie, and that makes him yours forever. He'll always remember that.' He let that sink in and then he said, 'I'm going home to phone the school. By now they'll be missing him, though a bit of a fright won't do them any harm. Sending their lads away up here on a day like this!'

By the time the two of them came from the school – the Housemaster and the Matron they were – Duncan was waiting with me.

'My sister found this boy out in the yard,' he said, 'dying of exposure. You nearly lost one today, I'm telling you.' Duncan sounded calm, like he always does. 'It's my opinion that he shouldn't be moved tonight - just look at him, listen to his breathing. We'll get Doctor Aitken in to see him right away. He's in safe hands here.'

Duncan suggested it for my sake, but they wouldn't let him stay, of course. They roused Sandy and sat him up on the bed. They hadn't brought anything warm to put him in. 'I'll fetch the clothes he had on,' I said. 'They're that thin they'll have dried out by now.'

While they dressed him I went and fetched the Shetland jumper I had knitted for myself that Christmas. 'I'll not see him go out that door covered the way he was when he came in,' I told them.

So that was how the story began - the Public School boy and the poultry keeper. A week passed and I could think of nothing but the boy. Duncan phoned the school; he knew I was fretting. They told him Sandy was in the San, still very poorly but beginning to pick up.

It was a Tuesday, five weeks to the day, when I heard a knock at the back door. That first time he had been too weak to knock, or maybe so bound by the rules that he wouldn't knock at a stranger's door if it would save his life. Poor lad.

'I've brought your jersey back,' he said. 'And thank you.'

'The only thanks I want is to see the colour in your cheeks,' I said. 'Come on in. I've got a bannock just baked.' I knew they were always hungry. 'Have you got a bit of time?'

'I'm still excused activities. I've got till four forty-five.'

We sat by the fire and I watched him eat. He had the same look about the mouth that Duncan has, gentle and quick to smile. After a bit I said, 'would you like to help me collect the eggs?'

I gave him a basket and sent him to the stone hen-house, the one that used to be a pig sty. He could take the gravel path along by the wall and keep his shoes clean. I slipped on my boots and went across the mud to the two wooden houses. I called out to him, 'How many have you got, Sandy?'

'I've got nine. One of them's still warm.'

'You win then. I've only got six from one house and eight from the other. I'll fry you one for a prize.'

When I think of it now, I suppose I might have asked him all the questions that children get pestered with – what's your best subject; what are you going to be when you leave school? But those questions are for strangers and he was never one to me. We washed the eggs and set them out on the big trays. I keep newspaper on the kitchen floor in the winter – the Sunday Post it was then – and I remember how I laughed when I saw him trying to read the 'Oor Wullie' comic strip, with his head upside down.

He had his egg and another slice of the bannock and then it was time for him to go. 'Don't be a stranger, Sandy,' I told him. 'I'm always here. Come in for a warm-up when you get the chance.'

I knew that just about everywhere was off-limits for the boys, but he took to sneaking in every couple of weeks or so. He came for the food and the warmth of course, and maybe for the thrill of breaking the rules. But it was more than that; my house was a kind of hideaway for him. Once he was inside the door he could be himself and do as he liked. He would explore the place and pick up anything that caught his eye. But if I offered to let him keep something he'd always refuse; the place had to stay just as it was. We had our routines – at tea-time he always had the same mug, a bright red one that I'd brought home long ago from a school trip to Aviemore.

He'd have a go on the chanter that I'd kept from when I was in the pipe band at school; I can hear the sound of it still. 'Highland Laddie' was always the tune and he got quite good at it. I'd embarrass him with my applause.

I longed to touch him as a mother would, to take his arm when we went out to the yard, but I had to hold it all back. I could never understand how the parents could give a boy away to be brought up in a place like that. Never to see his face at the end of each day; never to know when something was troubling him.

Most times I'd get Sandy to help me mix the feed and take it out to the troughs. I had found an old pair of boots that fitted him. He had a way with the hens – gave names to some of them. There was one who followed him everywhere, 'Chatty' he called her.

Then one day our luck ran out. I was on my own and there was a knock at the front

door – that was unusual for a start. It was Jimmy Swann, our local Bobby. Jimmy and I were at school together, the same class; he was a sergeant now.

'Maggie, I've got to ask you some questions.'

'Oh dear. What have I done, Jimmy?' I was in a jokey mood - nothing on my conscience I suppose.

'A complaint has been made by the authorities at Drumore. On the instructions of a parent.' He was giving me his official voice. He came in and told me: they were accusing me of abducting – I think that's the word he used – a minor, a young boy in their care.

'What nonsense,' I said. 'Tell them to come and talk to me.'

'They can't do that, not now they've made an official complaint. It's up to me to investigate and see if there are grounds for a charge. I'll have to talk to the boy as well, of course. I believe the parents could bring a case, privately if they want – they have money and the father is a lawyer.' I was being warned, right enough.

I told Jimmy about the day I found Sandy on my doorstep. I felt sure that would be an end to the matter.

'So you took his clothes off, you say.' Jesus, was I naïve, or what? There's what you do and there's what other minds can make of it. Wise up, Maggie, I told myself.

'He was soaked to the skin. He was perishing,' I said.

'Did you touch him?'

'Ye gods! I gave him a hug to stop him shivering. How could I not?' I wasn't doing myself any favours – I could see that - but it just came out.

'Was he naked then?'

'Of course not, you chump. He was wrapped up in a blanket. This is ridiculous - coming here with your nasty suggestions. You should be investigating the school for negligence. Or cruelty.'

Jimmy kept on, 'So then you put him to bed.'

'He collapsed. I got him into my Ma's bed. Then Duncan came and saw him and he went off to phone the school. Have you got enough evidence against me now, Jimmy?'

'You've got to see it from the parents' point of view, Maggie. I'll make my report and you'll be notified if any action is to be taken. The school will punish the boy, you can be sure of that. I don't think you know how serious this is to them. They've expelled boys for less.' My poor Sandy. He'd found a home from home and he was going to pay dearly for it. It was another boy who sneaked on him – followed him one day and saw him go in my back door.

'So my fate is in your hands, Jimmy,' I said as I let him out.

I heard nothing for a few weeks. I couldn't contact Sandy; all I could do was wait. Then an official letter came from Jimmy saying that no charges would be brought against me. No explanation, just the decision. Sandy must have spoken up for me.

A few days after that there was another knock at the front door. A whiff of perfume came through before I got the door open properly.

'You must be Miss McGregor. I'm Mrs Newton, Sandy's mother.' She was slim, like her son, and I could see a resemblance around the forehead and the eyes, in spite of the severe expression she was putting on.

There was no handshake from her so I pulled the door open and let her walk straight into my sitting room. She ran her eye over the place, noticing I'm sure the pre-war furniture – dark oak, a bit knocked about. Then she started straight away: 'My husband – both of us – were shocked when we heard what has been going on.'

'Come over here and sit down, Mrs Newton.' I put her in the chair Sandy always used. She sat on the edge, making as little contact with it as she could. I didn't want to be

overawed by the woman, but it was hard, sitting in my old jumper with the elbows darned and looking at her beautiful coat. How many coupons did that cost, I wondered.

'It must have been a terrible shock,' I said, 'back in February when you saw the state your boy was in.'

'Well, actually I didn't see him then. My husband needed me – there was so much on. I couldn't get away.' I looked her in the eye and kept my mouth shut.

'I've just flown in now, from Kuala Lumpur. And anyway, I knew Sandy was well looked after in the school San.' She put on the hard look, out to get the upper hand again. 'I understand you took Sandy in when he was on a run. You should understand that a bit of hardship - and overcoming it - is part of the training they get at the school. It makes men of them. It was quite against the rules to stop and shelter anywhere, never mind going into a stranger's house - the very idea! His father won't forgive him. And Sandy's been coming here ever since, I hear.' She looked round the room again. Distaste would be the word for her expression. 'The local police made light of it, but the school takes a serious view. Young Sandy deserves all he gets.' I thought about the weals I'd seen on his bottom. 'Sandy is the third generation to go to Drumore. His father and grandfather both rose to School Captain. We expect a lot of him. And you, Miss McGregor, have got some explaining to do.'

I kept quiet because I couldn't trust my voice. I thought of Duncan and how he would deal with this woman. I mumbled something about a cup of tea and hurried off to the kitchen, telling myself this is not an evil person. She doesn't know the story and she's being driven by her husband. By the time I came back I'd got myself under control..

I told her about that day in February, leaving out nothing except, of course, the weird state I'd been in myself. I finished up, 'It's my belief your son was at death's door when I found him. The temperature was down to zero, he'd practically nothing on and he wasn't well. He'd been to the matron that morning, he told me, and she wouldn't believe he was sick. She looked at his tongue and dosed him with syrup of figs!'

She didn't stay long after that. The fight had gone out of her.

'When Sandy was better he came to give me back my jersey and say thank you,' I told her. 'I wonder, have you spoken to the school doctor?'

'No, actually I haven't.'

'I think you should – he'll tell you about your son's condition.'

She said, 'Thank you Miss McGregor' and shook my hand. Then she turned back as she was going through the door. 'My husband doesn't know I came here today,' she said.

My poor Sandy. All the family expectations on his slim shoulders. He wasn't cut out to be School Captain, anyone could see that.

For a couple of weeks I was kind of numb, trying not to believe that I wouldn't see Sandy any more. Then, one day, there she was again – Mrs Newton – at my door. I was pleased to see her, thrilled even. I'd be getting news of her son.

It felt quite different this time. She'd left the pricey coat behind and we were both in our tweed skirts and jumpers. She sat back in the chair and I got us a pot of tea and some shortbread I'd just made.

'Sandy's fond of it,' I said, 'I've seen him eat six slices.'

'You've been good to him,' she said. 'He's been telling me about his visits here.'

'He's good company. We've had some laughs.'

'And while you were looking after him we were putting the police onto you. I do feel bad now.' I should have forgiven her straight away I suppose - after all, the caring was as much for my benefit as it was for Sandy's. But I kept quiet and she carried on, 'My husband is still very angry, of course, but I'll bring him round. He's annoyed I haven't flown back to KL

yet.' She gave me a kind of confidential look. 'Actually I haven't even booked a flight. This whole business has woken me up. For the moment I want to be a mother, as much as I'm allowed to.'

'Good for you, Mrs Newton.'

'Listen, why don't we drop the formality? I'm Virginia.'

'And I'm Margaret.' We let this new relationship settle a bit and then I said, 'I can see how it is, Virginia - you're out in Malaya and the school has to be both parents. I do wonder what kind of a mother it makes.' Then I stood up and said, 'Come and I'll show you the hens.'

I pointed out the little group of bantams, over by the wall. 'They were a day old when I got those, I knew Sandy would like them. We had fun trying to give them the names of the dwarfs.'

She looked across to my vegetable garden, fenced off from the poultry with chicken wire.

'We used to have nearly fifty acres when my father was alive,' I told her, 'but this is all I've got now. I couldn't manage more.'

The next thing I heard was that I was to be a person Sandy could visit, on the three Sundays he had free every term. Virginia told me. She'd decided I could be trusted and she wanted Sandy to have a bit of home comfort. How she persuaded his father I don't know. I never met him, but Virginia took to dropping in whenever she was back in the country, mostly in the school holidays. She got to like my place - said it was cosy. She would poke away at the fire till it was roasting us. Then she'd take the toasting fork down from its hook and I'd go off to cut a slice or two. We were quite chummy in the end.

Sandy came three times each term for the next four years and I lived for those visits. I saved up my coupons and put on a fine spread for his tea. Duncan always let me have some ham and butter from the farm.

Now that Sandy wasn't breaking the rules we could go out for long walks, across the first field and into Logan's Wood. We'd follow the same track but there'd always be new questions; nobody had ever excited him about the Scottish countryside. I loved telling him what I knew and seeing the way he took it all in. The wood seemed to put a spell on us and we'd concern ourselves with what we could see, and hear, and smell. Certainly no talk about school. I would bring a sandwich to keep us going until tea-time - fish paste it usually was - and we'd have it sitting in the branches of a Scots pine beside a little clearing.

At first it was just a word here and a comment there, but in his last year I saw the signs that my Sandy was taking on the ways of the place he grew up in. How long would it be, I wondered, before he started to see the humble poultry keeper with different eyes?

He told me about his plans to go to Edinburgh University. 'A lot of the Old Boys meet up on Saturdays in the Men's Bar at the George Hotel. It's a kind of after-rugby group. I'm not much of a player, but the Edinburgh Wanderers field about ten teams every Saturday. They should find a place for me somewhere.' I imagined the Men's Bar - loud, posh voices and crude jokes. I hated to think of Sandy drawn into a world that would coarsen him.

'If joining the Old Boys at the George Hotel means playing a game you're not good at, don't you think it's maybe the wrong club for you?'

As I saw Sandy change I was changing too, giving him my opinions. I couldn't help it, I had a mother's wish to see her son on the right path. But it seemed the boy I knew was not the one they saw at the school. The Careers Master was pushing him towards the Law, to follow in his father's footsteps. It seemed an awfully dry profession for an imaginative boy like him and I told him so. It was his last visit before he left the school.

Sandy vanished from my life. Months turned into years and he didn't come back. I had no way of contacting him. My mind started to slip again. I was seeing Sandy everywhere; talking to him all the time. 'D'you know,' I'd say, 'there's a pair of capercaillie nesting in our pine tree this year, would you believe that, Sandy?'

It's evening now. Jimmy Shand and the band are playing The Bluebell Polka. At this hour I usually do a spell on my rug. I'm making it for the hearth, to cover the burns on the carpet. When it's finished I'll be starting on a sweater for Sandy, dark green with cable stitch down the front. I have the wool and the pattern ready.

But tonight I can't settle to the work. I'm looking into the flames, in a kind of a daze. He was here, was he not? Did I not say to him: "*You'll be up to visit the Old School, I expect.*" And did he not answer: "*No, Margaret, I shan't be going there. I've come to see you.*" We were here by the fire when he told me he'd given up the Law; gave me one of his shy smiles and said he was writing plays for the theatre. "*You were right about the Law, Margaret, it wasn't for me.*" I did hear that, didn't I?

The proof will be there in the kitchen – two mugs on the draining board and a couple of slices taken from the bannock. My legs feel heavy as I make my way there.