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THE HAUNTING OF PRINCE HARRY

Electrified by outrage—and elevated by a gifted ghostwriter—his blockbuster memoir "Spare" exposes more than Harry's enemies.

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The Prince has suggested that he sees his book as an appeal for reconciliation, addressed to his father and brother. Photograph from Max Mumby / Indigo / Getty

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Balmoral Castle, in the Scottish Highlands, was Queen Elizabeth's preferred resort among her several castles and palaces, and in the opening pages of "Spare" (Random House), the much anticipated, luridly leaked, and compellingly artful autobiography of Prince Harry, the Duke of

Sussex, its environs are intimately described. We get the red-coated footman attending the heavy front door; the mackintoshes hanging on hooks; the cream-and-gold wallpaper; and the statue of Queen Victoria, to which Harry and his older brother, William, always bowed when passing. Beyond lay the castle's fifty bedrooms—including the one known in the brothers' childhood as the nursery, unequally divided into two. William occupied the larger half, with a double bed and a splendid view; Harry's portion was more modest, with a bed frame too high for a child to scale, a mattress that sagged in the middle, and crisp bedding that was "pulled tight as a snare drum, so expertly smoothed that you could easily spot the century's worth of patched holes and tears."

It was in this bedroom, early in the morning of August 31, 1997, that Harry, aged twelve, was awakened by his father, Charles, then the Prince of Wales, with the terrible news that had already broken across the world: the princes' mother, Princess Diana, from whom Charles had been divorced a year earlier and estranged long before that, had died in a car crash in Paris. "He was standing at the edge of the bed, looking down," Harry writes of the moment in which he learned of the loss that would reshape his personality and determine the course of his life. He goes on to describe his father's appearance with an unusual simile: "His white dressing gown made him seem like a ghost in a play."

What ghost would that be, and what play? The big one, of course, bearing the name of that other brooding princely Aitch: Hamlet. Within the first few pages of "Spare," Shakespeare's play is alluded to more than once. There's a jocular reference: "To beard or not to beard" is how Harry foreshadows a contentious family debate over whether he should be clean-shaven on his wedding day. And there's an instance far graver: an account, in the prologue, of a fraught encounter between Harry, William, and Charles in April, 2021, a few hours after the funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh, the Queen's husband and the Royal Family's patriarch, at Windsor. The meeting

had been called by Harry in the vain hope that he might get his obdurate parent and sibling, first and second in line to the throne, to see why he and his wife, Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, had felt it necessary to flee Britain for North America, relinquishing their royal roles, if not their ducal titles. The three men met in Frogmore Gardens, on the Windsor estate, which includes the last resting place of many illustrious ancestors, and as they walked its gravel paths they talked with increasing tension about their apparently irreconcilable differences. They "were now smack in the middle of the Royal Burial Ground," Harry writes, "more up to our ankles in bodies than Prince Hamlet."

King Charles, as he became upon the death of Queen Elizabeth, in September, will not find much to like in "Spare," which may offer the most thoroughgoing scything of treacherous royals and their scheming courtiers since the Prince of Denmark's bloody swath through the halls of Elsinore. Queen Camilla, formerly "the Other Woman" in Charles and Diana's unhappy marriage, is, Harry judges, "dangerous," having "sacrificed me on her personal PR altar." William's wife, Kate, now the Princess of Wales, is haughty and cool, brushing off Meghan's homeopathic remedies. William himself is domineering and insecure, with a wealth of other deficits: "his familiar scowl, which had always been his default in dealings with me; his alarming baldness, more advanced than my own; his famous resemblance to Mummy, which was fading with time." Charles is, for the most part, more tenderly drawn. In "Spare," the King is a figure of tragic pathos, whose frequently repeated term of endearment for Harry, "darling boy," most often

precedes an admission that there is nothing to be done—or, at least, nothing he can do—about the burden of their shared lot as members of the nation's most important, most privileged, most scrutinized, most publicly dysfunctional family. "Please, boys—don't make my final years a misery," he pleads, in Harry's account of the burial-ground showdown.

As painful as Charles must find the book's revealing content, he might grudgingly approve of Harry's Shakespearean flourishes in delivering it. Thirty-odd years ago, in giving the annual Shakespeare Birthday Lecture at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-Upon-Avon, the future monarch spoke of the eternal relevance of the playwright's insights into human nature, citing, among other references, Hamlet's monologue with the phrase "What a piece of work is a man!" Shakespeare, Charles told his audience, offers us "blunt reminders of the flaws in our own personalities, and of the mess which we so often make of our lives." In "Spare," Harry describes his father's devotion to Shakespeare, paraphrasing Charles's message about the Bard's works in terms that seem to refer equally to that other pillar of British identity, the monarchy: "They're our shared heritage, we should be cherishing them, safeguarding them, and instead we're letting them die."

Harry counts himself among "the Shakespeareless hordes," bored and confused as a teen-ager when his father drags him to see performances of the Royal Shakespeare Company; disinclined to read much of anything, least of all the freighted works of Britain's national author. ("Not really big on books," he confesses to Meghan Markle when, on their second date, she tells him she's having an "Eat, Pray, Love" summer, and he has no idea what she's on about.) Harry at least gives a compelling excuse for his inability to discover what his father so valued, though it's probably not one that he gave to his schoolmasters at Eton. "I tried to change," he recalls. "I opened *Hamlet*. Hmm: Lonely prince, obsessed with dead parent, watches remaining parent fall in love with dead parent's usurper . . . ? I slammed it shut. No, thank you."

That passage indicates another spectral figure haunting the text of "Spare"—that of Harry's ghostwriter, J. R. Moehringer. Harry, or his publishing house—which paid a reported twenty-million-dollar advance for the book—could not have chosen better. Moehringer is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter turned memoirist and novelist, as well as the ghostwriter of, most notably, Andre Agassi's thrillingly candid memoir, "Open." In that book, published in 2009, a tennis ace once reviled for his denim shorts and flowing mullet revealed himself to be a troubled, tennis-hating neurotic with father issues and an unreliable hairpiece. When the title and the cover art of "Spare" were made public, late last year, the kinship between the two books—single-word title; closeup, set-jaw portrait—indicated that they were to be understood as fraternal works in the Moehringer œuvre. Moehringer has what is usually called a novelist's eye for detail, effectively deployed in "Spare." That patched, starched bed linen at Balmoral, emblazoned with E.R., the formal initials of the Queen, is, of course, a metaphor for the constricting, and quite possibly threadbare, fabric of the institution of monarchy itself.

Moehringer has also bestowed upon Harry the legacy that his father was unable to force on him: a felicitous familiarity with the British literary canon. The language of Shakespeare rings in his sentences. Those wanton journalists who publish falsehoods or half-truths? They treat the royals as insects: "What fun, to pluck their wings," Harry writes, in an echo of "King Lear," a play about the fragility of kingly authority. During his military training as a forward air controller, a role in which he guided the flights and firepower of pilots from an earthbound station, Harry describes the release of bombs as "spirits melting into air"—a phrase drawn from "The Tempest," a play about a duke in exile across the water. Elevating flourishes like these give readers—perhaps British ones in particular—a shiver of recognition, as if the chords of "Jerusalem" were being struck on a church organ. But they also remind those readers of the necessary literary artifice at work in the enterprise of "Spare," as Moehringer shapes Harry's memories and

obsessions, traumas and bugbears, into a coherent narrative: the peerless ghostwriter giving voice to the Shakespeareless prince.

Moehringer has fashioned the Duke of Sussex's life story into a tight three-act drama, consisting of his occasionally wayward youth; his decade of military service, which included two tours of duty in Afghanistan; and his relationship with Meghan. Throughout, there are numerous bombshells, which—thanks to the o'er hasty publication of the book's Spanish edition—did not so much melt into air as materialize into clickbait. These included the allegation that, in 1998, Camilla leaked word to a tabloid of her first meeting with Prince William—according to Harry, the opening sally in a campaign to secure marriage to Charles and a throne by his side. (Harry does not mention that, at the time, Camilla's personal assistant took responsibility for the leak—she'd told her husband, a media executive, who'd told a friend, who'd told someone at the *Sun*, who'd printed it. Bloody journalists.) They also include less consequential but more titillating arcana, such as Harry's account of losing his virginity, in a field behind a pub, to an unnamed older woman, who treated him "not unlike a young stallion. Quick ride, after which she'd smacked my rump and sent me off to graze." The *Daily Mail*, Harry's longtime media nemesis, had a field day with that revelation, door-stepping a now forty-four-year-old businesswoman to come up with the deathless headline "Horse-loving ex-model six years older than Harry, who once breathlessly revealed the Prince left her mouth numb with passionate kissing in a muddy field, refuses to discuss whether she is the keen horsewoman who took his virginity in a field."

The leaks have done the book's sales no harm, and neither have Harry's pre-publication interviews on "Good Morning America" and "60 Minutes"; in the U.K., Harry did an hour-and-a-half-long special with Tom Bradby, the journalist to whom Meghan tearfully bemoaned, in the fall of 2019, that "not many people have asked if I'm O.K." But "Spare" is worth reading not just

for its headline-generating details but also for its narrative force, its voice, and its sometimes surprising wit. Harry describes his trepidation in telling his brother that he intended to propose to Meghan: William "predicted a host of difficulties I could expect if I hooked up with an 'American actress,' a phrase he always managed to make sound like 'convicted felon' "—an observation so splendid that a reader can only hope it was actually Harry's.

There is much in the book that people conversant with the contours of the Prince's life, insofar as they have hitherto been reported, will find familiar. At the same time, Harry bursts any number of inaccurate reports, including a rumored flirtation with another convicted fel— sorry, American actress, Cameron Diaz: "I was never within fifty meters of Ms. Diaz, further proof that if you like reading pure bollocks then royal biographies are just your thing." Not a few of the incidents Harry chooses to describe in detail are centered on images or stories already in the public domain, such as being beset by paparazzi when leaving night clubs—he explains that he started being ferried away in the trunk of his driver's car so as to avoid lashing out at his pursuers—and being required to perform uncomfortable media interviews while serving in Afghanistan in exchange for the newspapers' keeping shtum about his deployment, for security reasons. (An Australian publication blew the embargo, and Harry was swiftly extracted from the battlefield.)

Given that what Harry dredges up from his past are so often things that have been publicly documented, one wonders whether Moehringer was obliged to indulge Harry's extended dilation upon media-inflicted wounds, through Zoom sessions that even sympathetic readers will find exhausting to contemplate. There is a certain amount of score-settling and record-straightening, which, though obviously important to the author, can be wearying to a reader, who may feel that if she has to read another word about those accursed bridesmaids' dresses—of who said what to whom, and who caused whom to cry—she just might burst into tears herself. More

significantly, though, there are broadsides against unforgivable intrusions committed by the press, including phone hacking. (Harry is still engaged in lawsuits against a number of British newspapers that allegedly intercepted his voice mails more than a dozen years ago.)

And then there are pages and pages devoted to Harry's personal trials, which even the most dogged reporter on Fleet Street would not dare dream of uncovering. Chief among these is Harry's struggle to overcome penile frostnip after a charitable Arctic excursion with a group of veterans, which ends up in a clandestine visit to a Harley Street doctor; he writes, "North Pole, I told him. I went to the North Pole and now my South Pole is on the fritz." "On the fritz" is an Americanism that we can hope Harry picked up while guiding American pilots—he calls them Yanks—back to base in Afghanistan, rather than the exchange being the ingenious invention of his ghostwriter. Moehringer, on the whole, does a good job of conveying the laddish argot of a millennial British prince, who addresses his friends as "mate" and—repeatedly—calls his penis his "todger."

Above all, "Spare" is worth reading for its potential historical import, which is likely to resonate, if not to the crack of doom, then well into the reign of King Charles III, and even into that of his successor. As was the case in 1992 with the publication of "Diana: Her True Story," by Andrew Morton—to whom, it was revealed after her death, the Princess of Wales gave her full coöperation, herself the ghost behind the writer—"Spare" is an unprecedented exposure of the Royal Family from the most deeply embedded of informants. The Prince in exile does not hesitate to detail the pettiness, the vanity, and the inglorious urge toward self-preservation of those who are now the monarchy's highest-ranking representatives.

It's not clear that even now, having authored a book, Harry entirely understands what a book is; when challenged by Tom Bradby about his decision to reveal private conversations after having railed so forcefully about

the invasive tactics of the press, Harry replied, "The level of planting and leaking from other members of the family means that in my mind they have written countless books—certainly, millions of words have been dedicated to trying to trash my wife and myself to the point of where I had to leave my country." Pity the poor ghostwriter who has to hear his craft compared to the spewing verbiage of the media churn—by its commissioning subject, no less. (Man, what a piece of work.) Remarkably, Prince Harry has suggested that he sees the book as an invitation to reconciliation, addressed to his father and brother—a way of speaking to them publicly when all his efforts to address them privately have failed to persuade. "Spare" is, you might say, Prince Harry's "Mousetrap"—a literary device intended to catch the conscience of the King, and the King after him.

If so, the ruse seems about as likely to end well for Harry as Hamlet's play-within-a-play efforts did for him. Moehringer, at least, knows this, even if Harry may hope that his own royal plot will swerve unexpectedly from implacable tragedy to restitutive melodrama. In a soaring coda, Moehringer has the Prince once again reflecting on the royal dead, describing the family he belongs to as nothing less than a death cult. "We christened and crowned, graduated and married, passed out and passed over our beloveds' bones. Windsor Castle itself was a tomb, the walls filled with ancestors," Harry writes. It's a powerful motif: the Prince—shattered in childhood by his mother's death, his every step determined by the inescapable legacy of the countless royal dead—as an unwilling Hamlet pushed, rather than leaping, into the grave.

Recalling the meeting with his father and brother in the Frogmore burial ground with which the book began, Harry invokes the most famous soliloquy from the play of Shakespeare's that he says he once slammed shut: "Why were we here, lurking along the edge of that 'undiscover'd country, from whose bourn no traveller returns?' " Then comes a final, lovely, true, and utterly poetry-puncturing observation: "Though maybe that's a more apt

description of America." In moving to the paradisaical climes of California, Harry has been spared a life he had no use for, which had no real use for him. The unlettered Prince has gained in life what Hamlet achieved only in death: his own story shaped on his own terms, thanks to the intervention of a skillful Horatio. You might almost call it Harry's crowning achievement. ♦

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