

1.

All day long, lying on the sofa in the sitting room of her parents' London mansion flat, Beth hears the clunk of the elevator doors opening and closing.

Sometimes, she hears voices on the landing – people arriving or departing – and then the long sigh of the elevator descending. She wishes there were no people, no elevator, no pain. She stares at the old-fashioned room. She stares at her crutches, propped up against a wing chair. In a few months' time she is going to be thirty.

There is a Portuguese maid, Rosalita, who comes in at two o'clock every day.

She is never late. Rosalita has a gentle face and plump, downy arms. As she sprays the furniture with beeswax polish, she will often talk about her old life, and this is the only thing that Beth enjoys – hearing about Rosalita's old life in a garment factory in Setúbal, making costumes for matadors. The places Rosalita describes are hot and bright and filled with the sound of sewing machines or brass musical instruments. She describes how the matadors used to flirt with the

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seamstresses. They were young, she says, and full of ardour and their sweat was scented with incense, from the number of visits they made to the bullring chapels. These things remind Beth that there were days long ago when she was innocent enough to worship the ordinary beauty of the world.

In 1964, the lover came.

He was American. His name was Thaddeus. He came in and looked at Beth, who was nineteen years old. He was forty-eight, the same age as Beth's father. He was a commercial photographer, but when he saw Beth, with her serious, exquisite face, he said: 'I have to photograph you.'

Beth knew that she shouldn't go near him, that his skin would burn her, that his kiss would silence her. But she went.

Her mother said to her: 'I know what you're doing. I haven't told your father. I really think you should end this. He's much too old for you. It's shameful.'

But all Beth could think was, I love this shame. I'm on fire with shame. My shame is an electric pulse so strong, it could bring the dead to life.

Thaddeus had an estranged wife named Tricia, an ex-model who lived in California. Something he liked to do with Beth was to describe the many ways he used to make love to Tricia. Sometimes, at moments of wild intensity, he called Beth 'Tricia'. But Beth didn't mind. She could be anyone he chose: Beth, Tricia, Julie Christie, Jean Shrimpton, Jeanne Moreau, Brigitte Bardot . . . it didn't matter. Whatever self she'd had before she met him was invisible to her now. At certain moments in a life, this is what a person can feel. She was her lover's lover, that was all.

* * *

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While Rosalita is dusting Beth's crutches, which she does very tenderly, from time to time, Beth shows her pictures from her press file.

The picture Rosalita likes best is of the car. It's in colour. There's nobody in the photograph, just the car, parked on the gravel of the house Beth once owned in the South of France: a pillar-box-red E-Type Jaguar soft-top with wire wheels. Rosalita shakes her head and whispers, 'Beautiful car.'

And Beth says, 'You know, Rosalita, there was a time when it was very easy for me to buy a car like that. In fact, it was given to me, but I could have bought it. I had all the money in the world.'

Thaddeus had no money. Only what he earned from his photography for the ad agencies of domestic appliances and food and hotel exteriors and yachts and London bobbies on bicycles, wearing what he called 'those droll Germanic helmets'.

'Jealousy of David Bailey,' joked Thaddeus, 'is my only flaw.'

Beth looked at him. He was thin and dark. There were dusty patches of grey in his chest hair. He let his toenails grow too long. He was beginning to go bald. There were times when Beth thought, He's just a very ordinary man. He doesn't have the grand, sinewy neck of Charlton Heston or the swooning brown eyes of Laurence Olivier. He's not even tall. But she knew that none of this made the least difference to her feelings.

In the car crash, Beth's legs had been broken in five places. They had been the legs of a dancer, strong and limber, shapely and thin. Now, her bones were bolted together with metal and confined in plaster of Paris. What they would look like when the plaster of Paris was one day cut away,

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Beth couldn't imagine. She thought they might resemble the legs of a home-made rag doll, or those floppy limbs the women seem to have in paintings by Chagall, and that forever more, she would have to be carried through life in the arms of people who were whole.

Sometimes, while Rosalita is trying to clean the flat, the power goes off. This is now 1974 and the Three Day Week is going on. 'All caused,' says Beth's father, 'by the bloody NUM. Trade unions hold this country to ransom.'

Though Rosalita shakes her head in frustration when the Hoover falls suddenly silent, she has sympathy for the coal miners, towards whom Beth is indifferent, just as she is indifferent to everything else. Rosalita and Beth smoke Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes in front of the gas fire – Beth on the sofa, Rosalita on the floor – and try to imagine what the life of a coal miner might be like.

'The thing I wouldn't mind,' says Beth, 'is the darkness.'

'Darkness may be OK,' says Rosalita, 'but there is also the heat and the dirt and the risk of the fire.'

'Fire?'

'Fire from methane gas. Fire coming out of the tunnel wall.'

Beth is silent, thinking about this fire coming out of the wall. She says to Rosalita: 'I was burned.'

'In the crash?'

'No. Not in the crash. The car never caught fire. I was burned by a man.'

Rosalita looks up at Beth. It is getting dark in the flat, but there is no electricity to turn on, so Rosalita lights a candle and sets it between them. By the light of this candle, whispering as if in church, Rosalita says: 'Your mum tell me

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this one day. Your American man. Your mum is crying. She says to me, “Beth was going to have a beautiful life . . .”

‘I did have a beautiful life. It ended early, that’s all.’

Thaddeus lived in Kensington, when Kensington rents were cheap back then.

He’d furnished his studio flat entirely from Habitat, down to the last teaspoon. The carpet was rough cord. The bed was hard. On the hard bed, he took intimate photographs of Beth, which he threatened to sell to *Penthouse* magazine. He said Bob Guccione was a friend of his and Guccione would gag for these. He said, ‘Why waste your beauty, Beth? It’ll be gone soon enough.’

Beth replied: ‘I’m not wasting it. I’m giving it to you.’

And so he took it. He kept taking, taking, taking.

One night, as he was falling asleep, Beth said: ‘I want to be with you for ever. Buy me a ring and marry me. Divorce Tricia. You don’t love Tricia any more.’

‘I don’t love anyone any more,’ he said.

These words sent a shock wave through Beth’s heart. It began to beat very fast and she found it difficult to breathe.

‘Why don’t you?’ she managed to say.

He got up and went to the window, staring out at the London night. ‘You will see,’ he said, ‘when you’re my age, when your life hasn’t gone as you imagined . . .’

‘See what?’

‘I mean that you’ll understand.’

She didn’t understand, but she was always careful, with Thaddeus, not to show ignorance or stupidity. He’d often said he thought American girls were smarter than

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English girls ‘in important ways’. She tried to visualise the ring he would buy her: a diamond set high in a platinum claw.

Now, she thinks again about what he’d said – that his life hadn’t *gone as he’d imagined*. And this leads her to wonder about the lives of her parents.

She knows she doesn’t think of them as *having lives*, as such; they’re just performing the duty of existence. They have dull, well-paid jobs, working for a Life Assurance company called Verity Life, with offices in Victoria Street, not far from the flat.

They pay for things. They watch television. The mother is half in love with Jack Lord, star of *Hawaii Five-O*, who drives a police motor launch at breathless speed. She loves it when a suspect is apprehended by Jack and he barks, ‘Book him, Danno!’ to his second-in-command. To the NUM hot-head, Arthur Scargill, defending the strike that has taken Britain into darkness, the mother often shouts, ‘Book him, Danno!’ And this always makes the father smile. The father’s smile is like a weak gleam of sunlight falling upon the room.

The parents have survived all that Beth has done to them, all that has been done to her. Beth tells Rosalita that they will outlive their own daughter and this makes Rosalita bustle with agitation and reach for the crutches and tell her to get off the sofa and walk round the room. Beth tells her it’s too painful to walk, but Rosalita has cradled in her arms matadors with lethal wounds; she’s impatient with people complaining about pain. She gives the crutches to Beth and says, ‘If you walk to the fireplace and back again, I will

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make hot chocolate with rum.’ So Beth does as she is told and the pain makes her sweat.

The taste of the rum reminds her of being in Paris with Thaddeus.

She let herself get sacked from her job in the Gift Wrap counter in Harrods before they left, because part of her had decided they would never come back. They would live like Sartre and de Beauvoir on the Left Bank. Thaddeus would make a name for himself photographing French actors and models and objets d’art. They would drink black coffee at the Flore. She, Beth, would begin her career as a writer.

Thaddeus told her he’d been loaned an apartment ‘with a great view’ by an American friend. The view turned out to be of the Cimetière de Montparnasse, but Thaddeus continued to call it ‘great’ and liked to walk there, taking pictures of gravestones and mausoleums and artificial flowers, early in the morning. He said nothing about how long they would be staying in the City of Light.

The apartment had almost no furniture, as though the American friend hadn’t yet decided to move in. The floors were wooden and dusty. The hot-water boiler screamed when it was turned on. Thaddeus and Beth slept on a mattress under a crocheted blanket of many colours.

Thaddeus said he had no money to buy sheets, but he had money, it seemed, to take them to an expensive gay and lesbian nightclub called *Elle et Lui*, where the personnel greeted him like a long-lost star and where a tall, beautiful woman called Fred became their friend and lover.

Fred lived in a hot little garret not far from their own empty, echoing apartment. Here, they drank rum and coke

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and made what Fred called *l'amour exceptionnel*. She said love between three people was *radioactive*; once you'd experienced it, it stayed in your blood for ever. She called Thaddeus 'Thad'. She whispered to Beth: 'Thad brought you here for this. It's the only kind of love he values because it's a democratic love. *Tu comprends?*'

She wanted to ask, does that mean what we had in London wasn't precious to him? But she didn't want to hear the answer. And she liked the way being touched by Fred excited Thaddeus. He called them 'the two most beautiful women in the world'.

'How long did you stay in Paris?' asks Rosalita.

Beth can't remember. Sometimes, she thinks it was a whole year and the seasons turned in the cemetery and the snow remoulded the tombs. Sometimes, she guesses that it was about a month or six weeks – until Thaddeus ran out of money.

She says to Rosalita: 'It was a kind of dream.'

She can't remember a summer season to the dream; only a cold spring arriving and the great grey *allées* of horse chestnut trees clothing themselves with green. There used to be a sequence of photographs of her, leaning out over the churning river in that same springtime, with her hair cut short like Jean Seberg, but these have been put away somewhere and their hiding place forgotten.

She can remember being ill for a while with *la grippe*. Fred came round, bringing an old fur coat, and covered her with this. Then Thad and Fred stood at the window, silhouetted against the wan light of day, and Beth could see them thinking, What is to be done now? – as though all human activity had come to a sudden end. And she

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knew that they would soon arouse each other by deft, secretive means and ask her to watch whatever they decided to do next. But she closed her eyes and breathed in the scent of mothballs on the fur and knew that she was drifting far away on a tide of naphthalene. She tells Rosalita: 'I can remember that feeling of floating out of my life, while fellatio was taking place.' And Rosalita crosses herself and whispers: 'Such things you have seen. Try to forget them now.'

She wants to forget them, but she can't. She says to Rosalita, 'Tell me something else about Setúbal and the matadors.'

Rosalita replies that she should really get on and clean the bathroom, but then she goes to her bag and takes out a photograph of a young man in a matador costume. It's a faded picture, but the weight of gold sequins on the shoulder pads still cast a spangled luminescence onto the soft skin of the young man's face.

'My brother,' says Rosalita quietly. Then she lights a cigarette and sighs and inhales and explains: 'In Portugal we don't kill the bulls. We say there is no need for this blood. The *cavaleiros* on horseback stab them with *bandarilhas* and the *forcados* tease them until they are still.'

'And then what happens?'

'Then the matadors must come and risk their lives against them. Instead of killing with a sword, they stab with one last *bandarilha*. But a bull does not know it is not going to be killed. It will try to wound the matador with its horns. And this is what happened.'

'To your brother? He was wounded.'

'Yes. Antonio. You see how beautiful he was. More beautiful than me. He died of his wounds. And I see my

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parents thinking, It should have been Rosalita who was taken from us, not Antonio. So this is when I left Portugal and came to England.’

Beth is silent. She reaches out and holds Rosalita’s hand.

Thaddeus and Beth came back from Paris. Perhaps it was summer by then, or autumn. Seasons are of no account in the way Beth remembers what happened next. It just happened in time, somewhere, and altered everything.

She became pregnant. She knew she would have to move out of her parents’ flat; her father wouldn’t tolerate her presence any more, once he knew her story.

While he and her mother were at work, she packed two suitcases with everything she owned, which came down to very little, just a few nice clothes, including a grey sleeveless dress from Mary Quant and four pairs of high-heeled boots. Pressed in among these things was the notebook she’d taken to Paris, which was meant to be full of notes towards a novel, but which contained no notes at all, only ink drawings of Thaddeus and Fred and of the dilapidated bedroom window, beyond which strange creatures floated in the Parisian sky: winged lambs, feathered serpents.

There were a few other things. A copy of *Le Petit Prince* by Saint-Exupéry and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. There was a wooden tennis racket and two silver cups she’d won at school – one for being tennis champion, the other for ‘good citizenship’. She would have left these behind but for the sentimental idea that she might one day show them to her child and the child might laugh and be proud.

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She got into a taxi and arrived at Thaddeus's apartment towards the end of morning. She'd long ago asked to have her own key, but Thaddeus had said, 'Oh no. I never do this.' He had a way of making his utterances absolute and incontrovertible, like the authority of the CIA was behind them.

She got out of the taxi and rang the bell. Arriving at this door always made her heart lift, as though she was coming home to the only place that sheltered her. She set the suitcases down beside her, like two arthritic dogs who found movement difficult.

A stranger answered the door. Or rather somebody who was not quite a stranger, a French architect whom they had met once for lunch in Paris at the Dôme in Montparnasse. His name was Pierre.

Pierre said in his accented English: 'Thad said you would come. The flat belongs to me now.'

'What?' said Beth.

'Yes. I've taken it on. Thad has gone back to California. I am sorry. May I offer you some tea?'

Beth says to Rosalita, 'I died there. Right there, between the two suitcases. That's when the real Beth died.'

Rosalita is sympathetic and yet sceptical. She says, 'I have seen many deaths, including Antonio's, and you have seen none. Death is not like that.'

'You don't understand, Rosalita,' says Beth. 'There was the girl who was loved by Thaddeus and when he left for California, that girl ceased to be.'

'But you are here. You are alive.'

'This "I" is not that "I". It's the person who took over

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from her. It's the person who wrote the bestselling book called *The American Lover*.'

2.

The book was begun the day after the abortion.

The first scene was set in the abortionist's house (or 'clinic', as the surgeon called it) in Stanmore. It had a panelled hall and a view of a semi-rural recreation area.

Beth (or 'Jean', as she named her protagonist) was given an injection that she was told would make her forget everything that was going to happen. But the one thing she could remember was her inability to stop crying, and a nurse came and slapped her face, to make her stop, and afterwards there was a mark on her cheek where the slap had landed. The mark became a bruise and the bruise took a long time to fade.

Then, Beth's unborn baby was gone. She was a new self, who had no baby and no lover. Her bones felt as brittle and empty as cuttlefish shells and her head as heavy as a heap of wet earth and stones. It was difficult to make this wet earth function as a brain. It needed some skilled potter's hand to do it, but no such person was nearby.

Beth had a friend called Edwina, whom she'd known since schooldays, and thanks to Edwina – a girl with very clear skin, untouched by life – who drove her to Stanmore and collected her again, she was able to hide the abortion from the parents. They thought she and Edwina had gone on a boating picnic that day with some friends in Henley. She told them she'd got the bruise on her face by being accidentally hit by an oar.

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On the way back from Stanmore, Edwina asked Beth what she was going to do now. Beth felt sleepy and sick and didn't want to have to answer questions. She stared out at the night folding in on the long and terrible day. She said: 'I'm going to become Jean.'

'Who's Jean?' asked Edwina.

'A kind of heroine, except there's nothing heroic about her. I'm going to write her story and then try to sell it to a publisher.'

'Do you know anybody in the publishing world?' asked Edwina.

'No,' said Beth.

The abortion 'scene' began the story, but wasn't its beginning. It wasn't even its ending, because Beth had no idea what the ending would be, or even if there would *be* a proper ending, or whether the narrative wouldn't just collapse in upon itself without resolution.

What mattered was writing it: the act of words.

Beth began it in her Paris notebook. She let the words travel over the faces and bodies of Thad and Fred and over the window frame and the winged lambs beyond. To write about the abortion, about Thaddeus's desertion, wasn't difficult; what was difficult was writing about the happiness that had come before. But she knew she had to do it somehow. You couldn't ask readers to care about the loss of something unless you showed them what that something had been.

The story began in London, then moved to Rome instead of Paris. Jean and her American lover, Bradley, were loaned an apartment just outside the Vatican City. Their transgressive love with a third person, Michaela, took place within