

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

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two blocks of one of the holiest places on earth. The ringing of St Peter's bells tolled upon their ecstasy. In the apartment below them lived a lowly priest, whose life became a torment. Beth worked hard upon the sexual agonies he suffered. She wanted everything about the book to be shocking and new.

Beth wrote every day. She thought her parents would nag her to find a job to replace her old one at the Harrods Gift Wrap counter, but they didn't. It seemed that if you were a writer, you could get away with doing nothing else. Other people would go out to work and come back and you would still be there, unmoving in your chair, and they would make your supper and wash it up and you would collapse onto the sofa to watch *Juke Box Jury*. They would place forgiving goodnight kisses on your agitated head.

The father sometimes asked questions about the book, but all Beth would say was, 'You're probably going to hate it. It's about a girl going crazy. It's about things you don't talk about at Verity Life.'

But this didn't seem to make him anxious. It made him smile a tolerant smile, as though he thought Beth had underestimated him. And one Saturday morning, he took Beth to a second-hand shop off Tottenham Court Road and helped her choose a typewriter, and paid for it in cash. It was an old industrial Adler with a body made of iron and a pleasing Pica typeface and a delicate bell that tinkled when the carriage reached the end of a line. After Beth set the Adler on her desk, she felt less alone.

A letter came from California.

Thaddeus had that childish, loopy writing many Americans seemed to think was adequate to a grown-up life and his powers of self-expression were weak.

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When Beth saw that the letter began *Dear Beth*, she laid it aside for a while, knowing it was going to smite her with its indifference.

Later, she took it up again and read: *I tried to tell you several times that I couldn't promise to stick around in London but I think you weren't listening. When you are my age, you will see. Money is important. I have to be a man of the world as well as a lover. Tricia has inherited her mother's house in Santa Monica. It's a nice beach-house, which I could never on my own afford. You would like it. And I can bathe in the ocean most days and forget about the cold of Europe. You will be OK. If you go to Paris, see Fred and tell her the Old American has gone back to the sun. Love, Thad.*

Beth folded the letter into her notebook and went and lay down on her bed. She thought about the crocheted blanket that had covered them in Paris: the rich smell of it, which was both beautiful and tainted. She thought about the lens of Thaddeus's camera pointed at her body and the shutter opening and closing, opening and closing, gathering her further and further into a prison from which there was no exit.

There was only the book.

It was written in eleven weeks. Everything that Beth had experienced with Thaddeus was relived through Jean and Bradley. The slow, exquisite way a single orgasm was achieved sometimes took a page to describe. Fred/Michaela became a male-to-female transsexual with handsome white breasts. Bradley became a painter. His own genitals, both aroused and dormant, featured repetitively in his art. Jean was a beauty, with a mouth men tried to kiss in the street

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and tumbled blonde hair. She was Desire Absolute. Bradley and Michaela screamed and wept over her and sometimes lost all control and beat the floor, while the poor priest lay in his narrow bed beneath them and jabbered his Hail Marys as a penance for his own sexual incontinence.

It was typed out on the Adler, with a blotchy blue carbon copy underneath. Beth stared at this carbon copy. She thought, Jean is the smart top-copy of a person now, and I'm the carbon, messed up and fragile and half invisible. But she also understood that no book quite like this had ever been written by a twenty-year-old girl. The pages crackled with radioactive heat. Readers could be contaminated in their thousands – or in their millions.

Beth now remembered that she knew nobody in the publishing world. She'd had no idea it was a 'world', exactly. She'd imagined there were just writers and printers and the people who paid them doing some slow gavotte together, which nobody else ever saw. All she could do was buy the *Writers' and Artists' Year Book* from Smith's, choose an agent from its pages who promised 'international representation' and send off the book.

Rosalita sometimes says how sad it is that most of what she and Beth talk about in the winter afternoons is concerned with endings of one kind or another. But she likes the next bit of Beth's story. What happened next seemed to promise new happiness: Beth was taken on by an agent.

'The agent was called Beatrice,' Beth tells her. 'After she'd read the book, she invited me round to her office in Canonbury Square. There was a bottle of champagne waiting. She said, "I can sell this novel in forty countries."'



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‘Forty countries!’ gasps Rosalita. ‘In Portugal, we probably couldn’t name more than half of those.’

‘Well,’ says Beth, ‘I probably couldn’t either. I never knew Panama was a country, I thought it was a canal. And I’ve forgotten the list of all the places where the book was sold. All I know is that money started to come to me – so much money I thought I would drown in it.’

‘And then you buy the red car?’ asks Rosalita.

‘No. Not that car. That was a gift, which came later. I bought another car, a Maserati. But a car didn’t seem much to own, so I bought a house in Kensington and then I drove to France with Beatrice and I bought a second house in St-Tropez.’

‘Were you happy?’ asks Rosalita.

‘No. I was famous. I made the cover of *Paris Match* and *Time* magazine. I perfected the way I looked. Not like I look now, Rosalita. It was my moment of being beautiful. I got letters from all over the world from people wanting to go to bed with me. I probably could have slept with Jean-Paul Belmondo and Marcello Mastroianni, if I’d tried.’

‘Ah, Mastroianni. What a god!’

‘Yes, he was, I suppose,’ says Beth. ‘But I never met him.’

As if to affirm the disappointment of not meeting Mastroianni, the lights in the flat go out suddenly and the afternoon dark presses in. Rosalita goes hunting for candles, but can’t find any, so she lights the gas fire and by its scented blue light changes the subject to ask Beth what her mother and father thought about the book.

‘Oh,’ says Beth. ‘Well, I remember the way they looked at me. Sorrow and pity. No pride. They told me I’d sold my soul.’

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‘And what did you say?’

‘I said no, I gave my soul away for nothing. Thaddeus still has it. He keeps it somewhere, in a drawer, with old restaurant bills and crumbs of stale tobacco and discarded Polaroids that have faded to the palest eau-de-Nil green.’

Rosalita doesn’t know what to say to this. Perhaps she doesn’t understand it? Her comprehension of English is known to falter now and then. The gas fire flickers and pops. Rosalita gets up and puts on her coat and before leaving places a kiss on Beth’s unwashed hair.

After *The American Lover*, there would need to be another book, a follow-up, so Beatrice said. Did Beth want the world to think she was a one-book wonder?

Beth replied that she didn’t care what the world thought. She was rich and she was going to live. She was going to live so fast, there would be no moment in any part of the day or night to remember Thaddeus. She would crush him under the weight of her new existence.

She went to St-Tropez, to redesign the garden of her house. She drank most nights until she passed out and slept sometimes with a beach lifeguard called Jo-Jo, who liked to stare at pornographic magazines in the small hours.

The garden progressed. In a shaded area of Corsican pines, Beth built a temple, which she filled with an enormous daybed, hung with soft white linen. She spent a long time lying on this daybed alone, drinking, smoking, watching the sea breezes take the pines unaware.

News came from Beatrice that *The American Lover* had been sold in five more countries. A Swedish director wanted to turn it into a film. An Icelandic composer was writing

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*The 'American Lover' Symphony.* Pirated copies had reached The Soviet Union and a young Russian writer called Vassily wrote to say he was writing a sequel to the novel, in which Bradley would be executed by a KGB agent in Volgograd. *This, he wrote, will be a very violent death, very terrible, very fitting to this bad man, and I, Vassily will smuggle this decadent book out of Russia to the USA and it will become as famous as your book and I will be rich and live in Las Vegas.*

In this cold, dark winter of 1974, Beth spends more and more time looking at her press file. There is not one picture of Thaddeus in it. He is the missing third dimension in a two-dimensional world. Beth's vacant face, caught in the white glare of photographers' flashbulbs, looks more and more exhausted with the search for something that is always out of sight.

She can remember this: how she looked for Thaddeus in Iceland, in shabby, raucous nightclubs, in hotel dining rooms, in the crowd of tourists congregating at a hot spring. Later, she searched for him in Canada, on the cold foreshore of Lake Ontario, in a brand-new shopping mall, in the publisher's smart offices, on the precipice of Niagara Falls.

And then in New York, where, finally she went and was fêted like a movie star, she kept finding him. He was at a corner table in Sardi's. He was standing alone in the lobby of the Waldorf Astoria. He was in Greenwich Village, walking a poodle. He was buying a silk scarf in Bloomingdale's. He was lying on a bench in Central Park. He was among the pack of photographers at her book launch.

She thinks that he came back to her so strongly there, in America, because of all the voices that sounded like his.

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And one evening, as she was crossing Lexington Avenue, she heard yet another of these voices and she stumbled and fell down, slayed by her yearning for him. The man she was with, a handsome gallery owner of Persian origin, assumed she was drunk (she *was* often drunk) and hurled her into the first cab he could flag down and never saw her again.

She sat in the back of the cab like a dead person, unable to move. The sound of the cab's engine reminded her of the motor launch Thaddeus had once hired on the Seine. The day had been so fine that Thaddeus had taken off his shirt and she had put her arms round his thin torso and stroked his chest hair. And the ordinariness of him, the way he tried so hard and did so much with this fragile, unremarkable frame of his, had choked her with a feeling that was not quite admiration and not quite pity, but which bound her to him more strongly than she had ever been bound, as though her arms were bandages.

In the screeching New York night, Beth wondered whether, after all, after living so hard to forget him, she wouldn't fly to California and stand on the beach in front of his house at dawn, waiting until he got up and came to her.

She imagined that when he came to her, they would stand very still, holding on to one another and the sighing of the ocean would soothe them into believing that time had captured them in some strange, forgiving embrace.

When Beth came back from America, she got married. Her husband was an English aristocrat called Christopher. He was a semi-invalid with encroaching emphysema, but he was kind. He told her she needed someone to care for her, and she felt this to be true: she was being suffocated by the

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surfeits of her existence. Christopher said that, on his part, Beth would ‘decorate’ his life in ways he had often thought would be appropriate to it, but he reassured her that he preferred sex with men and would let her sleep alone. His house in Northamptonshire had a beautiful apple orchard, where he built her a wooden cabin. He suggested she might write her books in this cabin, and he furnished it with care.

She spent some time there, playing Bob Dylan songs, watching the apple blossom falling in the wind, but she knew she would never write another book. She had no life to put into it, only the half-life that she’d been leading, since writing *The American Lover*. And the years were beginning to pass. She was being forgotten. People knew that she was the author of what had come to be known as a ‘great classic about transgressive first love’ but times were changing, and they couldn’t quite remember what all the fuss had been about.

Beth liked Christopher because he sheltered her. When her house in St-Tropez burned down, Christopher began on her behalf a long wrangle with a French insurance firm. But he couldn’t win it. The house had been struck by lightning, so the insurers said, and nobody could be insured against ‘acts of God’.

Christopher lamented all the money Beth had poured into this house, but she found that she didn’t really care about it – either about the house or about the money. The person who got mad was Beatrice. She screamed at Beth that she was letting everything slip through her fingers. ‘You will soon see,’ she said, ‘that the money will dry up, and then what are you going to do?’

She didn’t know or care. With Christopher, she had suddenly entered upon a period of quiet. It was as if her

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heart had slowed. She liked to work in the greenhouses with Christopher's gardeners (one of whom, a handsome youth called Matty, was his most favoured lover), potting up seedlings, tending strawberries, nurturing herbs. Only now and again did some resistance to this quiet life rise up within her. Then she would get into the new red E-Type Jaguar that Christopher had given her and drive at terrible speed down the Northamptonshire lanes, screaming at the sky.

'Were you trying to die?' Rosalita asks her.

'Not trying,' Beth replies. 'Just laying a bet.'

'And you didn't think, maybe you hurt or kill someone else?'

'No. I didn't think.'

'This is not good,' says Rosalita. 'You were like the bull which wounded my brother. You had a small brain.'

One time, she just went on driving until she got to London. She called Christopher to say that she was safe and then stayed in her Kensington house, doing nothing but drink. Her wine cellar was emptying but there were still a few cases of champagne left, so she drank champagne.

She'd intended to drive back to Northamptonshire the following day, but she didn't. She was glad to find herself in a city. She found that if she went to bed drunk, Thaddeus would often visit her in her dreams. He would come into her room very quietly and say, 'Hey, kid.' He would remove the hat that he sometimes wore and sit on the bed and stroke her hand. This was as far as the dreams ever got, and Beth began to work out that this affectionate, silent figure was waiting for something. He would never say what. He sat

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very still. Beth could smell his aftershave and hear his quiet breathing.

Then, one morning, she believed she understood. Thaddeus was asking for her forgiveness.

She typed out a letter on the old Adler. She felt very calm, almost happy.

She told Thaddeus that she'd been crazy with grief and this grief and its craziness just wouldn't let her alone. She said: *I guess the book said it all, if you read the book. Jean loves Bradley way too much and when he leaves her, she's destroyed. I let Jean die, but I'm alive (in certain ways, anyway) and I have a husband with a very English sort of kind heart.*

But when it came to typing the word 'forgive' Beth faltered. Though in her dream, Thaddeus had been affectionate and quiet, Beth now thought that he would find the whole idea of 'forgiveness' sentimental. She could hear him say: 'You're way off, *ma pute*, way off! We had a few turns on the merry-go-round, or whatever the British call that little musical box thing that takes you round in a circle. And then one of us got off. That's all that happened. There was no crime.'

Beth tore the letter out of the Adler and threw it away. She opened another bottle of champagne, but found the taste of it bitter. She asked herself what was left to her by way of any consolation, if forgiveness was going to be refused.

'After that,' she tells Rosalita, 'I gave up on things. I drove back to Christopher. His emphysema was beginning to get

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very bad. I stayed with him through his last illness until he died. I ran out of money. Christopher left his whole estate to Matty, his gardener friend, so I had to leave Northamptonshire. I missed the apple orchard and my little cabin there. The Kensington house was valuable, but it was all mortgaged by then. And after that there was the crash.'

'Tell me . . .' says Rosalita.

It's a winter afternoon, but the lights are still on. Rosalita is coiling up the Hoover cable.

'Well, I'd hung on to that car. It seemed like the only thing that anyone had given to me and not taken away again. But I hadn't taken care of it. It was a heap of rust. People were right not to give me things, I guess. My brain wasn't big enough to take care of them.

'I wasn't trying to kill myself, or anything. I was driving to see my friend, Edwina, the one with the lovely skin, who'd helped me through the abortion.

'I was on some B-road in Suffolk. I braked on a bend and the brakes locked and that's all I can remember. The car went halfway up a tree. That long snout the E-Type has, that was concertina'd and the concertina of metal smashed up my legs.'

'Right,' says Rosalita, putting the Hoover away. 'Now you are going to do some walking, then we will have rum and hot chocolate.'

The Three Day Week has ended with the miners' defeat. Britain tries to get 'back to normal'.

'There is no normal,' says Beth to Rosalita. 'The only "normal" has been talking to you in the afternoons.'

But that is ending, just as everything else seems, always,



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to end. Rosalita is leaving London to return to Setúbal, to nurse her dying mother.

‘She doesn’t deserve me,’ Rosalita comments. ‘She only loved Antonio, never me. But in my blood I feel I owe her this.’

‘Don’t go,’ pleads Beth.

‘Alas,’ says Rosalita, ‘it has to be like this. Some things just have to be.’

On Rosalita’s last day both she and Beth feel unbearably sad. As Rosalita walks out of the flat for the last time, she says: ‘All the secrets you told me I shall keep inside me, very safe.’

‘And your brother, Antonio, the matador,’ says Beth. ‘I will keep his memory safe. I will think about the light on his face.’

Beth waits for the clunk of the elevator’s arrival. Then she hears Rosalita get into the elevator and close the door and she remains very still, listening to the long sigh of the lift going down.

A year after Rosalita leaves, Beth is able to walk once more, with the aid of a stick.

One day she takes the bus to Harrods, suddenly interested to visit the place where she’d worked long ago, cutting wrapping paper with mathematical care, fashioning bows and rosettes out of ribbon, making the most insignificant of gifts look expensive and substantial. It had seemed to her a futile thing to be doing, but now it doesn’t strike her as futile. She can see that a person’s sanity might sometimes reside in the appreciation of small but aesthetically pleasing things.

Holding fast to her stick, she gets on to the familiar

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escalators. The feeling of being moved around so effortlessly, whether up or down, has always given her pleasure. As a child, she used to beg to be brought here, to the escalators. She loved to watch the people moving in the opposite direction, like dolls on a factory conveyor belt.

She's watching them now, these human dolls: a multitude of faces, ascending to Soft Furnishings, descending to Perfumerie and Banking, all locked away in their own stories.

Then she see Thaddeus.

He's descending. She's going up. She stares at him as he passes, then cranes her head round to keep watching him as he goes on down. And she sees that he, too, has turned. Changed as she is, he has recognised her. His face is locked on hers.

She gets off the escalator at the first floor (Lingerie, Ladies' Shoes, Children's Clothes). Her heart cries out for her to run to the descending escalator, to follow Thaddeus, to rush into his arms. But her body is too slow. Her legs won't let her run. She stands on the first-floor landing, looking down.

She sees Thaddeus stop and look up. Then he joins the people surging towards the exit doors and follows them out.

*Captive*



Owen Gibb grew up on a hundred-acre farm in south Norfolk, with apple orchards and a pond for geese and ducks, and fields of lush grazing for a fine herd of Herefords. Wooden chicken houses, set out across a muddy rise, were shaded by ancient oaks. In the cool dairy, butter was churned.

When Owen's parents died, he had to sell the farm. What remained to him, when all the tax and all the debts had been paid, was a small bungalow, once occupied by his grandmother, and a piece of land, half an acre long, leading down to a quiet road. The new owners of the farm rooted out the apple trees and turned the dairy into a holiday cottage.

Owen knew that it was important, with a legacy as meagre as this, to make an immediate plan for it. Delay would get him nowhere. He was fifty and alone. His only companions were his black Labrador dogs, Murphy and Tyrant, and it was they who inspired his plan.

He designed a set of boarding kennels. He'd heard you could make a good living out of people's longing to be rid of their pets, in order to holiday in Spain or Florida – or just to be rid of them, full stop. For that was part of human

## *Captive*

nature: a longing to be rid of the things you'd thought you might be able to love, and found you couldn't.

All Owen had to do was build the kennels with care, make them solid and comfortable, so that he could designate them 'superior'. Long before the building work was complete, he'd chosen the wording for his sign: 'Gibb's Superior Dog-Homing Facility'.

He set the kennels in two rows, running down towards the road, with a green exercise space to the west of them. In each pen, he installed a shelter, made of wood planking and bedded with straw, which reminded him of the old henhouses. The open areas in front, where the dogs could walk round and round – as prisoners do in a yard – were fenced with sturdy chain-link. The flooring was concrete (the only practical solution) but underneath the concrete, Owen laid in a network of heating pipes that would run off the bungalow's oil-fired boiler. 'Your pet,' Owen heard himself announce to his future clients, 'will never suffer from cold in this facility.'

He decided, too, that his kennels would be available to all-comers.

After failing to halt his plans at the local council office, the owners of the farm had tried to get him to promise that he wouldn't take in dangerous dogs, but he'd refused. He knew that housing Staffordshire bull terriers, Dobermanns or Rottweilers would put up his Public Liability Insurance premiums. But Owen Gibb was a man who felt some affection for all animals. It didn't trouble him that some of them possessed a harsh kind of nature. He thought he could have grown accustomed to wolves, or even jackals – provided that there wasn't a whole pack of them: too many to love.

\* \* \*

## *Captive*

Word circulated quickly around the local area: ‘Gibb’s Superior’ was the best and most economical place to board your dog. The food and shelter were good, with the heated floors providing reassurance in winter. The animals got proper exercise every day – in rotation according to their breed, size and sex. And, most important of all, if you stayed away longer than you’d agreed, Owen would always ‘sort something out’.

Soon, Owen’s booking ledger was so crammed that he began to consider nibbling some land from the exercise space, in order to extend the kennels beyond the thirty places provided at present. It troubled him to turn an animal away, as though this act of his would condemn it to unacceptable suffering, or even death. Because people were hard-hearted: this he knew. If a pet stood between them and their restless desires, they weren’t ashamed to have it put down, or turn it out into some wasteland, far from home, to ‘fend for itself’ – whatever they thought that might mean.

Owen drew up plans for ten more units. He hired a plumber to find a way of running a spur off the underfloor heating grid and ordered a second oil tank.

Work was almost ready to begin when, on the first day of a new year – the kennels full to capacity with assorted boarders – a front of arctic weather drove south from Scandinavia and settled over East Anglia.

Snow fell and rested on the frozen earth and piled up on the wooden roofs of the shelters. Owen stood at his front window, watching.

The dogs came out of the shelters and smelled the frosty air and raised their heads into the whirl of snowflakes, trying

## *Captive*

to bite them as they fell. Though the blizzard was obliterating the path to the road, Owen was exhilarated to see that where it fell onto the concrete pens, it quickly melted. The heating pipes were doing their job.

Owen knew the dogs would still be cold in these conditions – especially the two Staffordshire bull terriers he'd boarded since Christmas, whose smooth skin appeared almost as vulnerable to Owen as the skin of a man's body – but they'd survive. He'd increase their food ration, shred newspapers to add to the straw, put coats on the Staffies and on the overweight little Dachshund bitch called Cherry.

It snowed all day, pausing at night to uncover stars and a deep frost, and began snowing again the following morning. It felt, to Owen, as he worked on the paper-shredding, as though the fat snow would never stop, but keep falling and falling into the heart of the year's beginning, blocking any artery that led to spring. But he and the dogs would endure it together, as the Herefords had endured it through his childhood, as the old apple trees had endured it, motionless in the wind, under their white burden.

Two days later, Owen was woken at seven, in darkness, by the sound of the dogs howling.

His bedroom was icy. He drew back the curtains and saw snow piled a foot high on the outer sill. He fumbled for the warmth of the radiator under the window, but it was cold.

Owen tugged on a fisherman's sweater, cords and worn slippers and padded to the kitchen, where he knew what he would find: the boiler was out.

The boiler was old, difficult to light. Owen kneeled down



## *Captive*

and took the housing off the ignition box, smelling oil, surprised at how quickly the appliance, which had been burning strongly at midnight, had cooled.

His hands were shaking. The sound of the dogs' howling choked him. Murphy and Tyrant, their tails optimistically wagging, crowded round Owen's crouching figure, and he didn't push them away, but kept them near to him for comfort.

He tried to think clearly. He spoke aloud to the Labradors: 'Useless to try to relight the boiler if snow's piled up on the chimney stack, eh, lads?' he said. Murphy licked Owen's face. Tyrant's tail beat against the boiler-housing. 'Boiler'll cut out straight off if there's anything blocking the outflow. So, what's to do next, Murph? Tyrant? Get a ladder, I guess, and clear the stack. Right? Then come back in and try the old relighting procedure. Pray it works.'

Owen tugged on heavy socks and boots and his warmest farm coat and opened the back door and Murphy and Tyrant went out to do their business, jumping through the snow to reach a favourite spot.

But Owen stood motionless on the threshold of the door. Hoisting a ladder, clearing snow from the stack: these tasks didn't trouble him. What he dreaded was the sight that awaited him at the kennels. He sniffed the outside air and could guess at a temperature of minus 5 or 6 degrees. Animals without fur succumbed quickly to hypothermia in cold of this intensity. They were howling now, but unless he got the boiler going, they would soon enough fall silent.

He's out in it now. He keeps looking back at his footprints in the snow, leading away from the oil tank, finding it hard to believe what he's just seen.

## *Captive*

He carries a bucket of high-protein food. He stands by the pens. Some of the dogs come out from the shelters and try to push through the deep snow towards him. He throws bits of food through the wire. There is no sign of the Staffies.

He longs for someone to help him. He thinks wistfully of the days when his parents were alive, companionable voices to console and advise. Because he's trapped. In the night – the coldest night of this winter – somebody came and committed a crime against him. He keeps vainly hoping that he's imagined it, but he knows he hasn't. Silently in the snow, these criminal people unlocked his oil tank and siphoned out every last drop of oil. Every drop.

He believes these criminals are his neighbours, the family who walk the loved land where he grew up, but who detest him and his dogs and want to bring all his endeavours to nothing. He can't be sure it was them, of course, and he believes that he will probably never get to the bottom of a thing so steeped in hate, but suspicion will linger. The very people who own what should have been his are intent upon his ruin.

He must defy them.

He's called all the oil-delivery merchants he can find in the phone book. Most – because it's the week of the New Year – aren't answering; those that answer say demand for heating oil is so heavy they won't be able to get to him for another nine or ten days.

Owen walks on slowly down the line of kennels. One of the pit-bulls lies dead with his jaw clamped round the chain-link gate, as though trying to bite his way out. The

## *Captive*

Dachshund, Cherry, is a lifeless, snow-covered mound. Owen shivers as he stares at the fat little corpse. From the bungalow comes the sound of his landline ringing: dog-owners calling from ice-bound stations or airports, asking him to keep the dogs until the thaw comes.

There will be no thaw. This is how it feels to Owen. He and the animals are imprisoned for all time in a frozen world.

He tries to master his shivering and to think clearly. He knows that he has no choice. He will have to bring the dogs inside the bungalow. Twenty-eight dogs.

He'll try to separate them, as he does for their exercise routine, so that they don't constantly mate and fight with each other. But still, their animal natures, confined, confused, will create turmoil around him. Their barking and howling and rampaging will fill his every waking hour and make sleep impossible. Murphy and Tyrant will cower in corners, hide in cupboards, their familiar territory usurped by strangers. And everything that Owen possesses will be torn and stained and brought to desolation.

But there's no other way to save the dogs. No other way. He feels paralysed, as though he's suddenly become ill or old.

He turns away from the kennels and walks towards the house. The howling and whimpering of the dogs resume as they watch him leave.

But he needs a moment of respite. He remembers that he still has electricity. He's going to make himself a cup of tea, something to warm him, at least, before he faces all that he has to face in the coming day.

## *Captive*

He fills the electric kettle. He stands waiting for the homely sound of its boiling to mask the noises outside, which now come to him as though from a faraway country, a barbaric place, where there is no order or kindness, the sort of place he'd hoped never to inhabit.