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Lucky Break

Written by Esther Freud

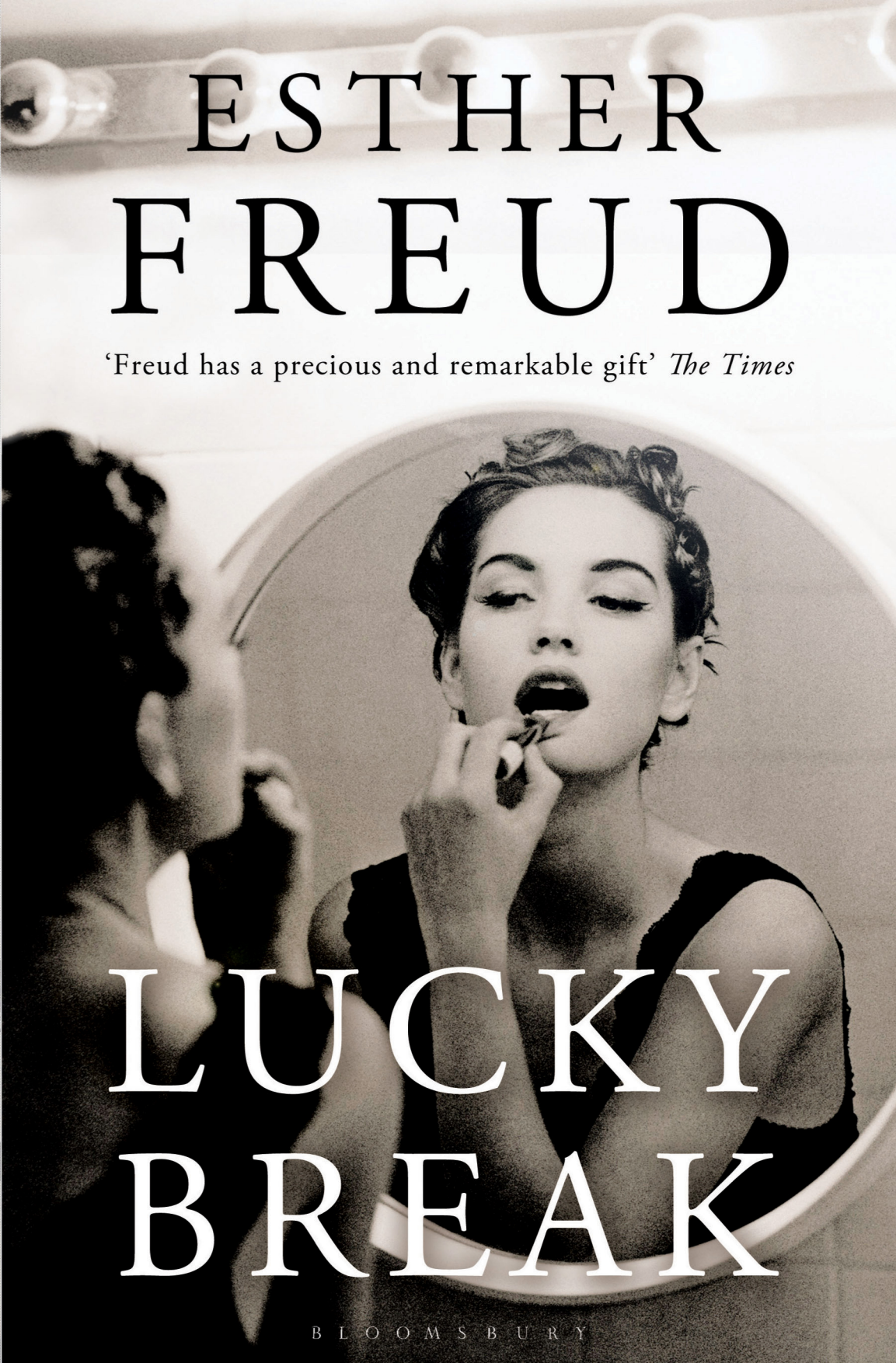
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ESTHER FREUD

‘Freud has a precious and remarkable gift’ *The Times*



LUCKY
BREAK

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Lucky Break

Esther Freud

B L O O M S B U R Y

LONDON • BERLIN • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

For my friend Kitty Aldridge,
who was there on the first day.

Hamlet's advice to the players.

‘Speak the speech I pray you, as I pronounced it to you trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it as many of our players do, I had as life the town crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus. But use all gently. For the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o’erdoing Temagant. It out-Herods Herod. Pray avoid it.’

William Shakespeare

Advice to a young actor starting out.

‘It’s not fair, and don’t be late.’

Michael Simkins

PART ONE

1992-1994

The Chosen

Nell dressed in the same clothes she'd worn to the audition. A large blue, cotton-knit top over faded jeans, with her hair tied high, so that when she turned her head the pale ends of it swished against her face. Yes, she thought, as she checked herself in the mirror, smudging a line of black under each terrified eye, that's good, and she held tight to the thought that however plump and freckled, she was the same girl who, six months before, had stood before the board of Drama Arts and performed a Shakespeare monologue and a modern.

'You off?' It was her landlord, leaning over the banister from his rooms above. Nell forced herself to smile up at him, unshaven, a mug of coffee in his hand. It embarrassed her, this unexpected involvement in her life. 'First day,' she told him, and heaving her bag on to her shoulder, she swung out through the door.

The bus was packed. Nell squeezed on and spiralled up the stairs, and pushing her way towards the back, she clung to a pole as slowly, haltingly, the bus moved forward along Holloway Road. Beside her a man jammed an elbow into her side as he wrestled with a newspaper, and a woman on a nearby seat struggled with a small boy. 'Shh,' the woman said, 'stay still, why don't you,' and she tried to slide the slippery weight of him up on to her knee. No one knows, Nell thought as she

looked down on the hurrying heads of the people below. No one knows that I've been chosen. And she almost flew forward as the bus came to a stop. The doors swished open, passengers streamed off, and one girl clattered up the stairs, breezy and beautiful, a silk scarf wound round her neck. Nell's heart clamped tight. What if she'd been chosen, too? Nell knew it was crazy, but this was exactly the kind of girl that should be starting drama school, and she imagined them arriving together and being told, sorry, we're over-subscribed, only one of you can stay.

The bus swung into the middle lane, and turned right by the prison. Nell watched the open plains of the triple-width road as the engine heaved and churned, and gathering speed, thundered up the hill. Large houses lined the way, flaking, dirty, with makeshift curtains, a sign for bed and breakfast beside one yellow door. Her parents had lived on this road once, right here, at the top of Camden, and then, when Nell was a baby they'd moved to Wiltshire, to a tidy, leaf-green village, where, after only a year, her father had declared that he was stifled. Nell began to count the roads, marking them off on her fingers, straining for the junction with York Way when the bus would slide under a bridge. She glanced at the girl, her face turned into sunlight, and pressed the bell. She didn't move, didn't even look round. And flooded with relief, Nell squeezed past her, and ran down the stairs.

The Oracle

Dan wasn't sure why he packed the letter, but at the last minute, along with black tights, white socks and a pair of flat-tened, size-eleven ballet shoes, he slipped it into his bag. Maybe he'd need it as a pass to gain entry to the college, maybe he'd be asked to present proof. He imagined a cloaked figure – a highwayman with a scarf over his mouth, leaping out to bar the way. 'Who goes there?' 'It's me,' Dan would protest and he'd point to the signatures of the directors of the school. But no one apprehended him. No one tried to keep him from his destiny as he made his way north along the busy road, short-cutting through an estate of flats with narrow, olive-green front doors, into a Victorian terrace, and up the wide, shallow steps of Drama Arts.

The building had originally been a hospital, although now there was nothing left but the façade, and the foyer – with its domed ceiling and stone-tiled floor – still held an air of urgency and panic. Students whispered as they milled about, some watchful of the door as it swung open, while others stood staring in silence at the noticeboard on which was pinned a list of names. Dan scanned the list until he found his own name, and reassured, wandered into the narrow corridor of the canteen where a hectic woman in an apron, grey hair trailing from a bun, was slicing mushrooms for a soup. 'I'll be open at first

break,' she told him. 'Best to have breakfast before you come, I can't open any earlier, it's just not . . .'

'No, it's fine . . .'

 Dan retreated, and catching sight of a girl in a lace dress pulling open another door, he followed her and found himself in a large, oval hall. There was a circle of chairs arranged in the centre, with several people already sitting at odd intervals, alone. Dan and the girl looked at each other, and, shrugging, they sat down.

'Hi,' she said. She had dark gold curling hair, and her legs under her dress were bare. 'I'm Jemma.'

'Dan.' He put out his hand, and instantly regretted it. Clumsily their fingers touched. 'Actually,' he admitted, 'I've no idea what I'm doing here.'

Jemma smiled, and a dimple dented her cheek. 'At my audition they asked me to imagine I was a snowman and I was melting, slowly. I nearly didn't come.'

Dan sank lower in his chair and watched as, one by one, the seats filled up. There was a tall red-headed girl biting her nails, and a boy with unnaturally green eyes. Dan could see, even from across the room, that his face was smeared with beige foundation, ridged in grooves around his nose. He turned to Jemma, hoping to share a smirk, but she was watching a group of long-legged blondes already chatting in a row. He let his eyes linger for a moment on her creamy skin, visible beneath the stretched wool of the dress, but when she turned to him he looked away.

There was one older student, a man in a striped city shirt. He sat with his arms crossed, his face deep red as if already prepared to be embarrassed. Beside him was a black girl of intimidating beauty, her hair cropped short, her cheekbones sharp, her almond eyes half closed with boredom.

'This free?' A boy with a Scottish accent slumped down on the other side of Dan.

'Sure.'

He stretched his legs. 'I'm Pierre.' Pierre had a gold hoop in one ear, and on his fingers a collection of tarnished silver rings. 'You'd think there'd be someone here to greet us, on our first day.' He tipped back his chair and Dan followed his gaze to a gallery above their heads where lockers stood like sentinels around the edge.

'They're probably spying on us from up there.' Pierre smiled widely to show he didn't care. 'Start as they plan to go on, I guess.'

'What do you mean?' Dan frowned.

'They have a theory here. Break them down to build them up.'

'Really?' He could feel Jemma listening. 'Break us down how?'

'Oh, I don't know.' Pierre shrugged. 'Strip away all our pretensions, get to the raw emotion, the bones. I've got a friend who was here a couple of years ago. She said it was intense.'

'I came and saw a graduation show,' the red-headed girl on his other side leant over, 'and how they got there I don't know, but it was bloody brilliant. As far as I'm concerned it's the only drama school worth bothering with.'

The door creaked open and a girl looked in. She was wearing a blue jumper that came almost to her knees and her eyes were wide with fear. She spotted the last empty chair, and on tiptoe, as if she could avoid being noticed, she made her way towards it.

Dan looked round. There were thirty students here now, fifteen girls and fifteen boys. They seemed an odd, assorted group.

'But is it true . . .' Jemma was leaning over him to get to Pierre, 'that people get asked to leave, just like that, for no reason at all?'

'It does happen,' Pierre lowered his voice. 'I mean, you know they're a couple, the men who run this place? Well, if they like someone . . . sometimes they get . . . a wee bit protective.'

There was one boy who was a real favourite, actually you may have heard of him, Ben Trevelyn, he's gorgeous, and he's doing really well, but anyway, every time he got a girlfriend, that was it. Two weeks later, she was gone.'

The room was full of chatter. Students discussing their auditions, their re-calls, what other drama schools they had applied for, whether or not they'd found anywhere to live.

'They threw them out?' Jemma looked shaken. 'Didn't anyone complain?'

Pierre laughed. 'My friend said the girls were pretty useless anyway. Actually, I think one of their dads did write a letter, but Patrick Bowery wrote back to say they were doing her a favour. Not encouraging her in this misguided choice of career when she was utterly devoid of talent.'

'God!' Jemma snorted. 'That's awful.'

'But I thought . . .' the redhead whispered, 'I mean, don't gay men usually love women?'

'Sure,' Pierre agreed, lifting one shoulder. 'But sometimes they love pretty boys more.'

The door at the far end of the room slammed. Everyone looked up and a hush fell as Patrick Bowery himself, taller and thinner than Dan remembered from the audition, strode across the room. He stopped at the edge of the circle, and slowly and carefully, with raised eyebrows, he looked them over, one by one. When he had scrutinised them all, he drew a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. It was a foreign pack, soft and unidentifiable. He tapped it against his palm and, releasing a cigarette, put it to his lips. He flicked a lighter, and inhaled deeply. There was a relaxing among the students. Pierre grinned, and a slight, fair girl began to rummage in her bag. Patrick exhaled airily. 'I smoke.' He said it loudly, cutting into the K. 'You don't.' The effect was startling. Everyone sat up straighter. There were no smiles now. Patrick took two more drags and ground the cigarette out under his foot. 'So,' Patrick

remained standing. 'I'm going to start today with the first baby steps of your education, by initiating you into the marvels and sophistication of the earliest documented era of theatre. The reason for this, and I know that it's not usually considered polite to mention it, but you young people who drift towards acting as a profession usually do so because you're Goddamn Fucking Useless at anything else.' There was a thinning of the air as every student in the room breathed in. 'But here, at this school, I will not, do you hear me? I will Not tolerate ignorance.' Dan noticed the mature student shift uncomfortably in his chair, and Jemma dipped her hand into her bag for a pen. Dan had nothing to write on except the back of his acceptance letter, and as Patrick Bowery launched into an elaborate description of the sixth-century BC cult of Dionysus, of orgies, outsized wooden phalluses, men who drank so heavily that they passed out on the hillside and were treated to miraculous visions of fornicating gods, Dan scribbled across the worn folds of the paper. Soon he ran out of space and looked round nervously, and Jemma, without meeting his eye, ripped a sheet of paper from her own pad and handed it over. Thanks, he mouthed, and he attempted to catch up.

Patrick talked of the significance of the Greek chorus and the dancers, the musicians and the instruments they played. He talked of his favourite playwrights, Aeschylus and Euripides, and he waited, watchful, as the students grappled with the spelling. 'Of course,' he continued, 'as you know, three tragedies were performed during just one day, followed by a comedy, and the most famous of the theatres where these spectacles took place was the theatre at Epidaurus. Now for any of you, really truly passionate about your craft, a visit to this ancient monument should be at the top of your list.'

Visit Epidaurus, Dan wrote, and the thought of azure skies, of history, of ancient, fallen columns, momentarily distracted

him. Where were they? He glanced over at Jemma's page, her writing, blue and beautiful, spanning out in legible lines. Comedy, he read. Bawdy, satirical, razor-sharp. By the time he'd copied it down, Patrick had moved on to college rules. 'Punctuality.' He looked ready for a fight. 'Is Vital. Anyone who arrives late will be sent home again. Late on more than three occasions during the course of one term and you can expect to be called into the office for an interview. Now,' he lowered his voice to a more thoughtful tone, and it occurred to Dan that everything he did and said had been rehearsed, 'not everyone in this room will stay the course. I want to warn you. Not everyone will have what we consider the suitable requirements to enter the third year. And the quickest way to find yourself Out,' the tempo was lifting again, 'is to fail to actually come In.'

There was silence while Patrick Bowery looked at the circle of students. Some of their eyes were fixed on him, their pale faces turned up like wilting flowers, while others stared down at their hands, appalled.

'It's not a game.' His mouth was twisted, his own face white. 'Out there. In the world. It's ruthless, harsh, competitive, the hardest profession to break into, and if you can't even manage yourself to be on time, there are no second chances. You'll be replaced. That's one of the things that you'll learn here.'

It was an hour and a half before he set them free. They gathered themselves up and fled to the canteen, where Becky, the grey strands of her hair newly bound up, her polka-dot apron pulled in tight, plied them with tea and sausages hot from the oven.

'Honestly,' Pierre rolled his eyes, 'ruthless, harsh, competitive. Anyone would think we were joining the SAS.'

'I Smoke. You Don't,' someone else tried, not a bad impression.

Dan took his tea and squeezed his long body into a corner, his back to the wall, listening to the shrieks of outrage, the

accents, adopted and real, the gasps and splutters of laughter as his fellow students dissected the day so far. He took out his notes and flicked through them, closing his eyes as he imagined himself centre stage in the vast stone auditorium at Epidaurus, his every syllable razor-sharp, his words booming out across the terraces where a thousand stunned spectators sat transported by the power of his voice.

After the break, Patrick Bowery was softer. He asked each student to introduce themselves and then, handing out slips of paper, he told them to choose one person in the room and write down three words to describe them. Keep it secret, he told them, one day we'll hand them back out, and see if first impressions are really what they seem to be.

'Is that what you do with us?' The red-headed girl smiled flirtatiously. 'Label us, and see if we evolve?'

'No. It is not,' Patrick snapped. His eyes were icy. He turned away and to Pierre's delight asked him to collect the slips of paper. The whole class watched him scamper round the circle, scooping them into a bag.

'So,' Patrick adjusted his pose, 'I'm going to let you into a secret. I'm going to tell you something that you may not know. At Drama Arts you'll be learning to Inhabit your Characters. You won't be performing. You won't be prancing around in fancy dress. There will be no public shows until the third year, and in the first year you'll only be seen by the staff. In the second year, if we think you're ready, we'll let the other students watch your efforts, and no one else, and this is because we want to do everything we can here to rid you of the desire to perform. We want you to learn to Be. To exist in your own world on the stage.'

Patrick shook his head. 'Now I'll let you into another secret. At other drama schools, however renowned, they don't Teach anything. At other drama schools they put on a series of plays

and hope that somehow, through pot luck, something will Sink in. But Here, and I hope you all realise how lucky you are to be here, You will Learn. You will be taught Stanislavsky's method of acting. You will learn to create a fourth wall. When you walk on stage you will have an Objective and a series of Actions, and these will be the secrets of your trade. You will be clothed with these tools, and you will cling tight to them like treasure. Never will you go ahead without them. Just as in life you walk into a room for a reason with all your thoughts and needs, your vices, your weaknesses and strengths. So you will walk out on stage. If you go to the theatre tonight, or on any night,' he continued, 'in our famous West End, you will see no end of vacuous performances, actors with no idea where they are, or where they're going, really just attempting to speak and not bump into the furniture, but a student of Drama Arts will stand out from this colourless troupe. A student from here will have a purpose, an energy, that will drive him forward, so when you are still here, rehearsing late, night after night, complaining you're cold or hungry or tired, remember how lucky you are. You are actually learning something. You are being Trained!'

Patrick looked around. All eyes were gleaming at him. Every face was on fire. Yes, Dan thought, this is what I came for! And then to his surprise, Jemma put up her hand. 'I wanted to ask, I mean, I do sometimes see really good plays, with actors, well, not from here . . . and so, is that just luck then, that they're good?'

Dan saw the girl opposite him – Nell – look up as if she too had seen actors she admired, and might be about to name them. But Patrick Bowery was frozen to the spot.

He took a deep breath and held it like a child in shock. 'LUCK?' he bellowed.

Jemma visibly began to shake.

'No. It is Not luck. It is your inability to tell what is art and what is interpretation. And in future if you have nothing

intelligent to say then PLEASE, unless you're asked, keep quiet.'

There was silence in the room. No one moved or spoke.

'Right.' Patrick Bowery had recovered himself. 'If there's nothing else, no other questions . . . you are free to go.'

That afternoon Dan changed, with the other boys, into ballet clothes, forcing his legs into the unfamiliar tightness of tights, hopping and laughing, and attempting to avert his gaze from the awkward bulges and dents revealed by Lycra. Eventually when they were all ready, they shuffled out to meet the girls, their ballet slippers scuffling, hoping for camouflage in the matt-black studio at the back of the building. 'Please,' Silvio Romano's voice was gentle, his dancer's body moulded into muscled planes. 'Please, tell me your names.'

He nodded as each one spoke, his eyes running over them, drinking them in, gliding in his whispery dance shoes up and down the rows. He was older than Patrick, with a worn face and dusty, dyed brown hair, but when he moved he was agile as a boy. The slight, fair girl with the broad Manchester accent was called Hettie, the quiet Canadian in full make-up was Eshkol. The French girl, one of the three blonde beauties, Dan forgot as soon as she'd spoken. But the redhead was Samantha. Then it was Dan's turn. Silvio smiled at him. 'Daniel, of course,' and Dan felt a melting as if he'd been touched. Jemma was beside him again, defiant in a low-cut leotard, and on the other side was the black girl, Charlie Adedayo-Martin. 'Ahh, Charlie,' Silvio paused. 'I remember you,' and Charlie, colt-thin and awkward, her skin smooth caramel, held his stare with a wry smile.

To Nell, dumpy, in a T-shirt pulled over her leotard, he simply nodded, perfunctorily, moving on to Susie, Tess, Mikita. The boys were grouped together too. Pierre, whose real name, Dan now knew, was Pete. There was the mature

student, Jonathan, newly gay, newly free from a life as an accountant, and Jermaine, lithe and powerful, his hands over his crotch.

‘Now,’ Silvio said, when each student had introduced themselves. ‘I want you to greet our accompanist, Miss Louise Goeritz.’ A tiny, ancient woman was crouched behind the piano, her head nodding rhythmically to music only she could hear. ‘Miss Goeritz, would you play us something? Miss Goeritz?’ But it wasn’t until Silvio touched her shoulder that she came to life, her fingers trilling automatically up and down the keys, running together, crashing down in a crescendo of surprising force. ‘Thank you.’ Silvio bowed, motioning for the students to applaud, and the old lady sank down once more on her piano stool and drifted into a reverie of her own.

Silvio waited for absolute quiet. Not a sigh or a shuffle in all the rows of black. ‘What I am about to teach you will be difficult,’ he looked small and mournful suddenly in his woollen trousers and black top. ‘Impossible even for some to understand, but if you can take it in, then, instead of nothing, there will be something, on which to base your art.’ There was a general stir, a shifting of bodies. It was harder than it looked, standing still. ‘Now, I want you to think about the four concepts,’ Silvio spread his arms as if he might fly, ‘of Sensing. Thinking. Intuiting and Feeling. These four concepts are revealed in our movements by the motion factors of Weight, Space, Time and Flow.’

Dan glanced around him. The faces of his fellow students were expectant, anxious, baffled. ‘There is much to learn,’ Silvio continued. ‘But let me tell you first about character divisions. All humanity,’ he explained, ‘is divided into six character types. And each character is made up of conscious states. Now, I do not expect you to remember everything. There will be many other opportunities to learn . . .’

In front of Dan, Pierre started to droop, and then as if to save himself, he began slowly rotating his head, emitting a series of sharp crunches which made Dan wince.

‘Now, each of these conscious or subconscious states,’ Silvio continued in his silky voice, ‘can be activated by bodily movements. We’ll take one character type at a time, and work on it and by the time we’ve examined them all, you’ll have six basic characters, each with its own rhythm, on which to base any part you’re given.’ He let his eyes peruse them for a minute as if to ensure that they were worthy of his effort. ‘So for example, Number 1, which I call Close . . .’ he roused himself, ‘is light and quick, a not very deep-thinking or complicated person, whose rhythm is made up of quick, dabbing strokes.’ Silvio adopted the voice of a young girl, ‘“I will not go down to the shops for you.”’ But his flowery Italian accent blunted the effect. ‘“You can bog off with your demands,”’ he continued, jabbing with his finger for effect. And relieved to have something to smile about, the whole class smiled.

‘And now,’ Silvio stretched his body into a star. ‘We will begin our movement. Keep your heads entirely still, and look with your eyes to the right. Only eyes. Now left. Lower left, upper right, right forward, lower right. And left.’

Dan thought he might be going to faint. He’d spent the night before on a friend’s too-short sofa, a boy he’d met at youth theatre. They’d sat up late, toasting his new beginning, his new life, only pausing to jeer at the TV news which showed John Major, white-faced and coldly sweating, reassuring the country that even though billions of pounds had been sold in order to keep Britain in the ERM, interest rates wouldn’t rise above 12 per cent. ‘The man who ran away from the circus to be an accountant,’ Dan’s friend laughed. ‘I bet he regrets it now.’ And then just when he’d been ready to sleep, three flat-mates, eager for a party, had come stumbling in and opened up more beer.

‘This is how we mark our thought processes in time.’ Silvio’s eyes were alive with wonder, and he explained how by looking up, and to the right, you could take your audience with you into the future, or back through time into the past. Dan’s body ached. There was nothing to lean against, and he wondered what would happen if he lay down on the floor. And then Silvio was dancing. He bent his knees, his body upright, and stamped his feet fast. The stillness and the force of him was startling. He moved in parallel planes, Cossack style, with his arms crossed, stamping, up and down and side to side. Miss Goeritz, awakening, caught up with him, and Silvio sprang on to his toes. He leapt and twisted, twirled and arced, holding his body, pulling against air, pressing himself into the ground, and then releasing, spinning, free.

How old is he? Dan wondered, and humiliated, he shook his tired limbs.

‘And so you see,’ Silvio came to a gentle stop, unfolding from a perfect pirouette, ‘nothing comes from nothing. Everything in this life, it comes from dedication and work.’

There was an awed silence.

‘We will meet again tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that.’ Silvio let his gaze wash over them. ‘And in each of you, if it is there to be discovered, we will find the kernel of your talent. Now . . .’ he looked as if he might be about to let them in on a final secret. ‘You may get changed.’ And, an old man again, he shuffled from the room.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Hideous Kinky

Peerless Flats

Summer at Gaglow

The Wild

The Sea House

Love Falls

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Esther Freud was born in London in 1963. She trained as an actress before writing her first novel, *Hideous Kinky*, which was shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and made into a feature film starring Kate Winslet. Her other novels include *The Sea House*, *Summer at Gaglow*, *The Wild*, *Peerless Flats* and, most recently, *Love Falls*. Her books have been translated into fifteen languages.

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