Outside

Charlotte Levin



MAGPIE
BOOKS

A MAGPIE BOOK

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For Gavin – whose story ended too soon

'To love someone deeply gives you strength. Being loved by someone deeply gives you courage.'

Lao Tzu

'It is very unfair to judge of any body's conduct, without an intimate knowledge of their situation.'

Emma, Jane Austen

SPRING

BEFORE

Marianne Hubert was disguised in a black bobbed wig, and Gerard Klein in a New York Yankees baseball cap pulled down low, as they watched a special matinee screening of *Betty Blue* in the Coronet Cinema, Notting Hill.

Their fingers interlaced as though they were created from the same mould, yet they experienced the film differently. Marianne listened. Gerard read the subtitles.

Mirroring the actors on screen, she whispered in his ear, *'Je t'aime. Je t'aime.'*

'*Je t'aime*, honey,' he replied.

She pressed the soles of her cowboy boots against the back of the chair in front, and the lifting of her knees caused her crochet dress to disappear into the crook of her thighs. Placing a finger over his wedding ring, she slid his hand towards her slightly swollen belly. His breath caught, and his famously heavy-with-life hooded eyes looked directly into her trademark doe-eyes. They shared a lingering kiss.

When they separated, she twisted to remove a Marlboro Light from her handbag. 'I can feel it's a girl.' She placed the cigarette in her mouth, lit it, and after an imperceptible inhalation, passed it over to him. 'We should call her Beatrice,' she said, staring up at the giant Beatrice Dalle on screen. 'And Gerard . . .' She turned to him, stroked his cheek. 'We can't fuck this up.'

NOW

Beatrice sits in the forest, eyes closed, naked, apart from Maman's cowboy boots and an old painted kimono which exposes a central strip of flesh and pubes.

The forest is her favourite escape. Preferable even to the ocean. Nature's music peels away her stress. The nightingale's melody mixed with long, high-pitched notes of the wood warbler, layered with the bluetit's 'tsee-tsee-chu-chu' and, of course, intermittent squawks of feral parakeet.

But today she's restless and opens her eyes, removes her earbuds. *Songs of the Forest Volume 2* fades to a faint tinniness against the sofa cushion.

'Wanker,' squawks Matisse as he lands on her shoulder.

Beatrice twists her head and kisses his hooked beak, which reactivates flight mode.

Apart from the Antarctica documentary on the silent TV, the room is watercolour-grey. She wishes it was oil-paint black, or even better, Vantablack, blacker than a black hole, (though, pettily, available to no one but Anish Kapoor). But the room is merely the darkest she can make it for this time of day. Curtains drawn, door closed to block any rogue particles of sunlight from the hallway. Lamps switched off. Messiness, muted. Outside, obscured.

An open notebook rests on the coffee table – the homework set by Dr Reynolds. Beatrice leans forward, reads back what she's written – *I pulled on my cigarette as I stood in Maman's dressing room* . . . Not wanting to continue, she closes the notebook and

takes it over to the bookshelf, slides it between *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* and *Plays Volume 1 – Henrik Ibsen.* Hoping that their heft would sandwich it so tightly, they'd save her from the words.

At the coffee table she pulls the half-empty packet of Doritos towards her, almost knocking over the bottle of cognac in the process. Reaching inside the foil, her fingers hit something soft and damp and emerge with a balled-up tissue which she throws to the floor with the others. She re-enters the bag and, on finding some dregs of tortilla chips, shoves them into her mouth.

Still chewing she goes to the stereogram and rifles through the vinyl, flicking each rejected album away as though it were a domino. There's too much choice, and she's unsure what she wants to listen to . . . needs to listen to. Eventually she opts for a sound of her childhood, *Tapestry,* Carole King. After sliding the record from its sleeve, she swipes it with the cleaning block and places it on the turntable. It crackles before the needle hits the grooves, and she takes her place on stage – the section of exposed parquet between the flokati rug and the TV. 'I Feel the Earth Move' starts up, and she shakes out her wrists and ankles like she would in movement class at drama school. She follows with head rolls, which hurt her neck and she's not sure that's right for a twenty-seven-year-old but puts aside the immediate worries of brain tumours and spondylosis.

Matisse flies to her shoulder, and after a couple of pads of his feet he remains still, as though waiting for lights-up on the opening of a musical production. Then he lifts his wings and vigorously bobs his head. Beatrice laughs. She'll never not find that funny. 'Jesus, Matisse,' she says, concerned he'll do himself an injury. But as always, he ignores any pleas to calm down, so she joins in.

She's not a technically good dancer but having a father who was professional has convinced her that she's infused with his

rhythm. A pang of sadness hits. She never got to dance with him on stage. The thought is swilled away with a quick swig of cognac.

Lost in music and movement she momentarily feels alive and free. Enjoying the release of much-needed endorphins. It's impossible to stay sad when doing jazz hands.

She yanks off the cowboy boots and steps onto the sofa, soft velvet unstable beneath her feet. She bends for the cognac bottle again, but this time she holds the neck to her mouth as though it were a microphone and sings along with Carole, the audience her reflection in the mantel mirror. Widening her arms exposes more nakedness. The shape of the kimono resembles a crucifix. She is a work of art, hanging in a private gallery, never to be viewed.

The doorbell rings.

'What happened?' squawks Matisse.

It's silly that she feels immediately anxious, because it's going to be one of two people – Mr Klimowski or Marvin – and as her best friends, they know her . . . foibles. Unless it's a delivery, though she's not expecting one today.

Like a surfer, she corrects her balance. Faced with her reflection again, her cheeks glimmer wet, and she swipes at her skin. They'll only worry. After returning the bottle to the table, she wraps the kimono tight around her body and drops to sitting, hurriedly putting on her boots to feel more secure when opening the door. Then she picks up Matisse and takes him to his cage. 'Only for a minute,' she says, over his piercing objections.

In the hallway, cold bleeds into her skin, and she hugs the kimono with a shiver as she clops across the hallway tiles.

It's Marvin. The shadow behind the stained-glass panel of the front door is taller and altogether bigger than Mr Klimowski's, and isn't the shape of a question mark. Marvin is practically a giant at six-foot-four (she'd asked him

once). 'Hang on, Marvin, just a sec.' Hand on latch, she pauses before applying her coping strategies. First, she inhales for five, exhales for five, then shakes out her hands like she did before dancing. Followed by side-to-side shuffles and a hard swallow to keep nausea at bay. Finally, she opens the door.

The sudden starkness is as shocking as the rise of auditorium lights during a curtain call. She squints, uses her hand like a visor. A gentle breeze momentarily kisses away unwanted sensations, but she's soon aware of the chaos of outside. Noise and traffic and hollers of youths on bicycles, the back doors of a parked white van being flung open by an invisible force, the packed bus pulling in at the stop opposite. She fixates on Marvin and defocuses her eyes so that all that lies beyond him blurs. 'Hey, Marvin, how's it going?'

'Yep, yep, good. Great in fact.' He lifts a Timberland-clad foot to the step above and leans against the scaly skin of his knee. His face so near that she could almost taste the salt sweat oozing from his enlarged nose pores. She places a hand over her lips to conceal the scent of cognac, as he hands over a pastel-pink envelope. A glimpse of the writing steals Beatrice's next breath. The familiar style. The hearts over the 'i's. It vibrates between her fingers like the blossoms in the breeze. She fixes a smile as though she hasn't just been stomach punched. 'Thank you. Why great? That's not like you.'

'Last day as a postman, innit.'

'What?' Immediately destabilised, she grips the door's frame.

'Yep, so I won't be knocking on and bending your ear about model ships anymore.'

'But I like model ships.' She doesn't like model ships. But the idea of no longer being bored by Marvin talking about them is horrendous. Fighting the desire to cry, she widens the grin. 'It's just . . . well, you didn't say.'

'Sorry, I didn't think.'

'No . . . no, why would you.' She forces a laugh. 'Well good for you, Marvin. What are you going to be doing?'

'Pest Control Technician at Rentokil.'

'Lovely.'

'If you have any pests that need controlling, I'm your man.'

'Cool.' The need to cry is so profound, her fake grin stretched so wide, that she needs this interaction to come to an end before she chokes. 'Okay, well you take care of yourself then, Marvin. I shall miss you.' The words squeeze through her teeth like a ventriloquist act. One where she's clearly also the metaphorical dummy.

He presents her with two thumbs up and descends the steps. Her smile drops as she starts to close the door, but when she sees him turn back round, it re-ignites.

'Sorry,' he says, rubbing the back of his head. 'This is awkward, but I . . . It's just that I've been wanting to tell you something for so long, and didn't know how . . . but, I guess with me leaving, I should just say it . . .'

For fuck's sake. Men. They're never *just* friends talking about model ships. There's always an ulterior motive. Concealed feelings that once exposed, women are supposed to tread around lightly. She knew it. The way he looked at her sometimes, the way he'd hand her her post. She glances at the poisonous letter in hand. But however lonely Beatrice is . . . however much she cares for Marvin, she could never . . .' What is it, Marvin?'

'It's just . . . well, my name . . . it's Martin. Not Marvin.' He gives a consolatory smile, lifts his hand in a half wave. Speechless, Beatrice copies the action, then watches him walk away, his red bag like the Google Maps dot moving down the street.

'Is everything okay, *kwiatuszku*?' Mr Klimowski's words make her jump. He's standing by the corner of the house, gripping a wheelie bin.

'It's Marvin,' she calls over. 'He's leaving . . . left. For good.'

'Marvin?'

'The postman.'

'Oh, you mean Martin.'

She breathes out slowly through pierced lips.

'Are you sure you're okay?' He abandons the bin and climbs a couple of steps.

'Yes, yes, I'm fine. Thanks for the bins. Obviously.' Gratitude never curbs the guilt. A pensioner performs this act of kindness for her every week, and all she can do in return is add things to her Ocado shop if he's runs out of something and provide him with cups of tea and company. That and rent reductions. Out of sync with the rest of London, she seems to lower Mr Klimowski's rent each year.

'Not a problem, not a problem, *kwiatuszku*.'

She never tires of him calling her that. *Little Flower*. And she knows it's weird that she calls him Mr Klimowski, despite knowing his name is Piotr, but the formality makes her feel more protected somehow. As though it was a different period. Mr Klimowski *is* from a different period.

'You're not going anywhere, are you, Mr Klimowski? Because you're not allowed to leave. You know that.'

'Are you . . . have you been crying, *kwiatuszku*?'

'No, no . . . it's hay fever.' She rubs at her nose and gestures towards the fallen blossoms.

'You get inside. You look dreadful.' He salutes, his shaky hand trapping a rogue wisp of white hair, and, with a precarious turn, steps down to the driveway.

'Be careful, Mr Klimowski.'

His arm rises in dismissal, a knotted branch in the wind.

With eyes still squinted, she watches him. His shuffling feet sound like sandpaper against wood. When he turns the corner of the house, she accidentally refocuses on the street. The

bus has now gone. An activator of her guilt, the candy-flossed cherry tree rustles, and more blossoms float to the ground. Its quiet softness ruined by the slamming door of the nearby van. A scruffy-haired guy in combats and what looks like a faded graphic tee walks from behind the vehicle and gets into the driver's side. He winds down the window and puts on his seatbelt. Relaxed, at ease. So comfortable in his freedoms, he's unaware of her watching him.

Then the dizziness arrives, and she's forced to quickly close the door.

Back inside, relief slips over her like oil. Spine pressed against the wood she comes face to face with herself in the hall mirror and makes a note to start taking vitamin D.

She'd almost forgotten about the letter weighing heavy between her fingers and stares at it, traces a ragged nail over the dried ink. Then with a burst of fire, she storms back into the sitting room where the stereogram now blasts 'It's Too Late'. And it is. It's *far* too late.

She heads straight to the sideboard, opens the drawer of crap, and tosses the envelope on top of all the other unopened envelopes with fucking stupid hearts over the 'i's.

NOW

Side B of *Tapestry* plays. 'You've Got a Friend'. Carole is just trolling now, and Beatrice runs over to the stereogram and lifts the record player arm to make it stop.

She flops back onto the sofa. 'I just can't believe he's gone, you know.' Matisse lands on her shoulder. 'And he definitely said he was called Marvin.' The best thing about Matisse is that he can't call out her bullshit. 'Could this day get any worse?' She kisses his beak. 'Thank God, I have you and Mr Klimowski.'

She picks up the remote and scrolls. Grieving the end of *Succession*, she hasn't got the capacity to concentrate on another series, and the new film offerings look utter crap. She moves on to the classics section, pausing at *Betty Blue*. When she was fourteen, Maman had forced her to watch it because apparently Beatrice Dalle is her namesake. Though she can't remember much about the film itself, more her mother's peculiar reaction to it. Not wanting this memory, Beatrice scrolls across to *The Bridges of Madison County*. There's no way she's watching that. She sobbed so much the first time round, Jonathan hadn't known what to do with her. That final scene, where Meryl Streep is in the car, gripping the door handle, and Clint Eastwood stands in the rain, willing her to go with him, accepting she won't, can't. There's something about the concept of love not being enough for people to end up together that destroys Beatrice. Requited but impossible. *Just get out of the car Meryl. Fuck your husband, fuck your life, fuck*

your kids. No, not fuck your kids. Meryl, stay in the car. Stay with your kids. Shit. Beatrice is so not watching that.

'And why didn't he just say straight away if he really was called Martin?'

The next film is *Castaway,* and she feels able to cope with the fact that the only person that leaves a poor, stranded Tom Hanks is a football. 'Wilson,' she shouts as she presses play. Matisse squawks.

'I mean, just say it at the time. Like, no sorry, it's Martin, not Marvin. It's not hard.'

She keeps the TV muted because the silence is soothing and, apart from the FedEx backstory, there's not much dialogue in this film.

In the third year at drama school, they were given a homework assignment where they had to analyse an outstanding performance with the sound off. She chose Paul Mescal in *Normal People* because, well, any excuse to obsess over Paul Mescal in *Normal People.* Tom Hanks doesn't exactly sweat Irish sex appeal, but he turns out to be gripping even when voiceless, and she's soon transfixed on his every mannerism. So utterly engrossed, in fact, that it's even more of a shock when the peace is disturbed by the incrementally rising scream of a siren.

Initially, she tries to ignore the vibrations through the house. Holds her breath. Waits for it to lessen, to dissolve back into the London streets. But it does not lessen. Does not dissolve. It reaches a deafening pitch and Matisse screeches, claws clenched into her skin while Beatrice slaps hands over her ears.

Then it all abruptly stops.

She stands, and with Matisse still attached to her shoulder, runs to the kitchen. Tentatively, she edges towards the window. The view is distorted by the dirty pane and sun's glare. All she

can see is swirling blue and she raises her hand to both shield herself from the light and peep through her fingers as though watching a horror movie. Matisse flies to the windowsill, taps his beak against the glass. 'Peekaboo,' he says. 'Peekaboo.'

Once brave enough, dropping her hand fully reveals the very thing she'd feared. An ambulance. Parked right outside her house. Or more to the point, Mr Klimowski's flat.

When a paramedic jumps from the vehicle's tail lift and strides down the driveway, equipment in hand, Beatrice gulps down the remembered taste of vomit thrown up on tarmac, holds her breath at recalling the metallic smell of blood.

Matisse returns to her shoulder, and she steps back and back from the window, swiping her hands over her face to erase images until she's stopped by the hard edge of the butcher's block.

There's a beat before she turns and runs back to the sitting room and calls Mr Klimowski. The rings alternate. Loud in her ear then soft and muffled beneath the floorboards. This repeats twelve, thirteen times yet there's still no *Hello, Piotr Klimowski speaking.* She puts the phone back down.

Okay. Okay. It's clear what she must do. It's simple. She just needs to open the front door, run down the steps, turn the corner towards his entrance, and discover if he's alive, injured, dead. Comfort him. Offer help. Hold his hand for support. Go with him to the hospital. Be a fucking human being. *Oh my God.* Tears arrive right on cue, and she involuntarily retches.

Dr Reynolds frequently asks what's the thing that will make her take the leap. If not this, then what?

With faux calm she puts Matisse in his cage and steps out into the hallway. Heart rate faster than that time as a kid when she mistook Maman's slimming tablet for a sweetie. She stops, turns to one of the *Vogue*-shoot stills of Maman lining the wall. 'Please,' she whispers. 'Help me be able to do this.'

Focusing back on the front door, she forces her mind to take in details. One of Dr Reynolds' distraction techniques. Beatrice notes the white gloss paint patched cream with age. The kaleidoscopic stained glass with cobwebbed corners. The method isn't working and her eyes clamp shut as she prays for the ability to do the impossible. But God has given up on her, because she remains there. Mummified. Unable to act.

There's a knock at the door. She opens her eyes to a silhouette, not a question mark as hoped, but a form she doesn't recognise, so instinctively drops to her haunches like a trapped wild animal.

A stretch of silence offers hope. But then comes the high-pitched ring of the doorbell. The drill extending so long, she can visualise the perpetrator's finger held determinedly against the brass button.

She stands, botches rushed coping strategies – box breathing, fast, jagged and erratic side steps. Bile tickles her throat as she fumbles with the latch.

The door is open now. Air shocks against her burning skin.

Unable to look towards the ambulance, her eyes fix on the person standing one step down. Stern-faced, Lego-like hair. It's the woman from the flats opposite. Piano Woman. Whose frantic ivory-tickling would waft over the road during open-windowed summer days. One particular year the same tune again and again and again; Maman eventually identified it as Bizet's *Carmen Overture*.

'Piotr's had a fall,' says Piano Woman before Beatrice has a chance to speak. 'I just got off the bus and thank God, I saw him down the side of the house. He slipped . . . after putting the bins out apparently.' Her lips thin like taut string. The delivery is cold, each word snapped off like an icicle. 'He's a bit befuddled with the shock and the paramedics think he may have fractured his hip.'

Beatrice remains as mute as Tom Hanks, but the relief at Mr Klimowski being alive thrusts her into folding forward, hand clutching beneath the kimono to the bare flesh of her stomach. This action releases more tears as though her navel was the button on an interactive doll. She tries the distraction technique again and focuses on Piano Woman's red Mary Janes.

'So, you're not going to go to him? Sorry, I'm just going to say it . . . an old man should not be doing your bins for you in the first place. I see him doing them week in week out, all kind of weathers, and I was going to say something sooner, but, well, I'm sorry, but it's wrong . . . it should be the other way around if anything. Don't you think you should at least go and see him before they leave?'

Beatrice forces herself upright, ignoring Piano Woman's glare. 'Yes . . . yes, you're right. I have to. I *have* to go and . . .' She lifts her foot in slow motion, because how would she live with herself if she didn't go to him? But thank God, she's interrupted by the paramedics emerging with Mr Klimowski on a stretcher. As they carry him down the driveway, he's even paler than she is, his face, crumpled with pain. 'Mr Klimowski,' she shouts as they near the pavement. 'I'm so sorry.' Once again, he lifts his hand dismissively. He knows she can't go with him to the hospital. He wouldn't want her to. They'll look after him. One of the paramedics is already tucking a blanket around his legs.

At the ambulance, they transfer him onto a trolley, then push him inside the vehicle. Piano Woman whips round to face Beatrice again. 'Right. Well, I suppose *I'd* better go with him then. And I don't know what your problem is, but what's just happened here is appalling. Appalling.'

Beatrice is shamed into silence, and Piano Woman descends the steps, arms wrapped around her body, each hand rubbing

its opposing limb as she scurries down the driveway, blossoms falling onto her shit hair.

Finally finding her voice, Beatrice shouts, 'He has a daughter; she lives in Kent, but stupidly I don't know her number. I promise I would go myself, but I can't . . .' Realising she's being ignored, she ends with, *'Va te faire foutre!'* But Piano Woman's knowledge of French clearly doesn't extend beyond Bizet, as she doesn't even flinch at being told to fuck off.

Unable to bear watching the ambulance drive away, Beatrice steps further inside and closes the door. Pressing her back against the wood, she's once again confronted by her reflection. As she stares, her face distorts into that of a monster. 'I am appalling. I am.' She turns to her mother's photograph. 'Well thanks a fucking lot.'

The kimono falls open, exposing her navel, which she presses as though it were now an intercom and she's awaiting a connection. Because for some, umbilical cords are like phantom limbs of amputees. Though severed, they will always be felt.