



STARTING AT LAST Maggie Gee

He was going to the garage to get started at last when his eye, looking out through his suburban window, fell on the first sun that pierced the garden. It was a short shining ribbon, a radiant way, which found the pink roundlets of quince blossom. The white and gold frills of gauze narcissi. The tight blue cones of grape hyacinth. Things he had put in once, long ago (when the family was young, and so was he) and which quietly happened year after year, undisappointing, endlessly reviving, held by their own rhythms, effortless.

‘What are you doing? You haven’t gone anywhere.’ Her voice, hectoring. ‘You see what you’re like? We’ll never get those shelves, Aaron.’

‘It’s the garden,’ he said. ‘It’s a lovely day.’

‘Get on with it.’

He hated her. It was starting again, the tight band saying ‘sad’ that weighed down the bony wings of his rib-cage. That sad bad tightness came when they argued. Because he loved Martha, as well as hated, and couldn’t leave her, but didn’t please her. He must not hate

her, because she was right. Life was short. He must get things done.

Since he had retired, he had done almost nothing but wait for spring, and watch summer, and relax into the slow burns of autumn, until she made him sweep up the leaves. He wanted to let them lie to make leaf-mould for the worms to pull down into the beds, but she didn't like mess, and they did rot the lawn, the lawn which she shaved to green perfection, her favourite part of their little garden.

Back then in the office, he might have told her, you didn't look out, you couldn't feel the weather, you had no idea which season it was. That was why these days he watched, and counted. Maybe today he would explain it to her.

He'd had four years of freedom since retiring. Four springs, four summers, four gold and red autumns. She gave him tasks, and he pretended to do them. Winters they turned in on themselves and quarrelled, but spring came round again, a miracle. Bulbs, to him, were magical things, hiding their fire in their folded layers, buried in the dark, unattended, holding their warmth year after year, then the generous, impromptu uncurling of colour, the fuse with its spark of life racing outwards, each time a new, tangential unfurling, a green flung wonder of leaf and flower. Their outsides, like his, were shabby and flaky, papery, peeling layers of skin, but underneath, the fire hid and waited.

He would do it at last. He would get started.

'I'm doing it,' he said, with an edge of anger. 'I'll get it done, you know I will.'

But the look she gave him seemed sour and scornful. 'Before both of us die, I hope,' she said.

'Why do you have to talk about dying?'

His brother had died two months ago. It had seemed impossible,

unbearable that a brother of his, from his generation... Joey has been the first one to go.

She came and stroked his shoulder, briefly. 'Sorry, Aaron. Love you, dear.'

She said it all the time; he didn't. *And yet, she doesn't. She doesn't love me.*

'I wish you loved me,' he said, sadly. 'I thought we'd be so happy, with both of us home.'

'We have been happy,' she said, surprised, and came back again, and kissed his cheek, moving into the path of the sunlight. 'Just because I want you to shelve up the garage, it doesn't mean that I'm unhappy.'

Suddenly he felt lighter, freer. She gazed at him with what was surely affection. She was looking pretty, in a plain tight sweater, her skin gleaming like a new tulip, dots of spring sun in her irises. Her hair was still more brown than grey.

'Let's go and lie down,' he said, urgently. 'How long is it since we made love?'

But her mouth pursed up, and her eyebrows creased, and she managed to look a decade older. 'You said you were going to the garage.'

'I know I did, but life is short.' Why didn't she take him in her arms?

'Precisely. There's just such a lot to get done. I don't mean to reject you, darling. It's just, when you say you're going to do a thing—'

'All *right*.' (She had been saying it all their married life: 'Do what you say you're going to do.' 'Don't say it if you don't mean it.' But where did that leave dreams, and reflections? When did you get time to understand?)

He turned away from the sun into the unlit room, and went to the understairs cupboard for his jacket. 'I'm going, I'm going.' His voice nagged with complaint. Even he could hear it, but he couldn't change it.

'Don't snap at me, Aaron,' she said. 'It upsets me.'

'Well you upset *me*,' he grunted from the cupboard. What a mess it was. He had promised to clear it, but decades of mess waited under the stairs, the children's sports kit, the Christmas decorations, the tangled tinsel of former happiness, things he didn't want to give up just yet, for surely it was all only yesterday, surely the ribbon of time might loop back, Emma would suddenly dart down the hall and slip on her rollerblades in seconds and swoop and dance like a swift down the road, and he and Martha would watch her together, holding hands, proud, in the bright doorway.

'I can't hear you, Aaron.' Now she was shouting.

'It doesn't matter,' he answered, and left, giving the back door a mean little slam. Perhaps he had won, and he felt briefly better. Then he thought about Martha, and felt worse. He did love her, even if he didn't say it. She was all he had now, all that was left. His yoke-mate for the last part of the road.

But once she was my skinny, my quicksilver darling, in Portugal, on the burning sand.

The inside of the garage looked very dark, as he peered in through the dusty glass of its windows, and he hesitated. It would be so cold. He would be in there for ever, once he started. He wanted to stay in the sun for a while. She couldn't see, from the house, what he was doing. That had always been the way that it worked: they had times together and times apart. Once he'd been alone for a bit, he would feel better, and go back in, and be cheerful again, and perhaps,

after lunch, she would come to the bedroom.

He had bought the timber for shelves last year, cheap plaster-board which would serve its purpose, but he wasn't sure that he had the right saw. He wasn't really a handy man. It was one of the many ways he had failed her. The handles fell off the drawers in the kitchen; the wrong kind of paint peeled off the doors. He had put off mending the fence too long, so finally the whole lot had to be replaced, and both timber and workmen were very expensive, and she'd said, wryly, 'That could have been a holiday.'

'We'll still have a holiday,' he had pleaded. 'I've got a credit card. Let's go to Lagos.'

They had honeymooned in Portugal, a lifetime ago.

'You're a dreamer, Aaron,' she had said, with finality, and then, with half a smile, 'At least the fence is mended. We can go away to Mum's, and the dogs won't get in.' Her mother, unlike his, lived on for ever, a pale widow in a suffocating flat.

He sat in the air and light and thought. His mother-in-law was eighty-nine. Beth was a freeze-dried version of her daughter, tiny, bony, almost transparent, the laughter and the fluidity gone, but her worries, her fusses, reminiscent of Martha's. She lived in a complex of sheltered flats where electric scooters whined quietly down the landings until their owners could no longer use them. The flat was so small that her muscles had wasted; she liked fresh air, but was afraid of flies, and dazzled birds, and mosquitoes, and traffic noise, so kept the windows shut all year round, and sat and suffered, fighting for breath. She was looking forward to her ninetieth. This was a marathon Beth meant to win, shuffling down her lane looking over her shoulder at the halt and lame who were her competitors. When Martha and Aaron came to stay, they had narrow twin beds in the cold guest

bedroom, and never stayed long enough, nor did the right things, and failed to bring the children, whom she claimed to love, though whenever David or Emma did visit, their grandmother made the young people feel guilty: 'No one ever comes to see me,' she whined. And yet, her eyes were good. Her hearing was good. She could still smell the freesias her daughter brought her, religiously, because they were Beth's favourites, because Martha still hoped to make her happy. She should have been happy to have lived so long: all those minutes, all those hours. She couldn't be happy; that was what angered him, Beth didn't realise how lucky she was, she was always taking against people, resenting this one, offended by that one, convincing herself she was hard done by, and the band in his chest grew tighter again, for he himself had never had enough freedom, had never had years to gaze out of the window—

God save me from going in that flat again. The smells of air freshener and dried dead lavender not quite concealing the meals on wheels.

Beth had never done a job, never earned money.

His envy turned into rage against Martha, her mother's daughter, his task-master. The iron bar pressed down hard on his chest, a lifetime's weight of frustration and anger—

But once she was twenty, with bright hair down to her hip-bone. She made love to me in the open air, under the mimosa tree in the Algarve, and then we heard goat-bells, and pulled up our clothes, so silly with laughter we couldn't get them on again.

— and Martha had suffered enough from her mother. The old bat had never approved of her, didn't think Aaron was good enough, didn't like the way they brought up the children. Didn't love her as she deserved.

As Martha has always loved Emma and David. She gives the love she has never received.

A sudden sweet smell. A piercing smell.

She loves our children. She says she loves me.

It's the winter jasmine, coming late this year, white sweet stars a small breeze is moving. He breathes it in, and his chest feels better, his body less of a rigid prison. I'm still here inside it, he tells the sun. I love it out here, I love the spring, I love it all, the daffodils, the jasmine... Tenderness makes him come alive. Tears spring to his eyes, of happiness, and he thinks, 'I love her, I always loved her', and that apprehension is a flood of white light, for this is the point, the point of it all, and all he needs is time to tell her, and he thinks, *I am going to pick her flowers, I will make a bouquet of the quince and the jasmine and offer it her, so she understands*, and the sun is all round him, full in his face, as he bends into the scent and starts pulling at the jasmine, which is wiry, tougher than he thought it would be, and as he bends deeper, he briefly feels dizzy, but he goes on stooping in the green and the gold, he must carry it through, he will finish what he started, the pain doesn't matter, only the love, only this final desire to please her, and he falls to the earth with his hands full of flowers, so she finds him there, when she comes out later, to make the peace, to urge him on — sprawled in surprise on the cold dark ground, at the very end of the short ribbon of sunlight, his wreath of love flung out towards her, and now she takes him in her arms.

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