**The Uses of Beauty**

When Clare wakes, the car is moving along a wide, fertile valley between fields of grazing cattle. She shifts in her seat, her side sweaty where her brother Robbie has been leaning against her. The last thing she remembers is crossing into Austria at a high pass, a young border guard peering in at them through the drizzle. Now the sun is out, and the tarmac is steaming in the heat. At a junction, her father slows down. ‘This is it,’ he says, turning the car. They pass through a sleepy village, all whitewashed houses with large overhanging roofs. In the deserted square is a small inn, *Der Jäger* painted across one wall in beautiful gothic script. Next to the lettering is a twenty-foot-high figure of a hunter in Tyrolean leather trousers and green hat, striding across a mountain side. Clare notices that he has the same jaw as John Travolta in *Grease*.

Quickly they pass out of the village. Clare looks back at the shrinking houses. ‘Where are we staying?’

‘In a charming farmhouse, Darling,’ her mother replies from the front seat. ‘All mod cons’.

‘And a TV?’

‘Oh, Darling, we don’t need a TV here.’

Clare feels a surge of anger at her mother. The wedding is only two days away. Her mother has refused to even talk about it for the past week.

The car begins the steep climb up the single-track road, the engine revving as her father takes the tight bends. The air is cooler in amongst the trees and, despite herself, Clare is surprised by the smell, the resin of the pines mixing with the grassy ripeness of newly cut hay.

As they get out of the car in front of a large, whitewashed farmhouse, an old woman comes out to greet them. She is short and almost round, dressed in a grey housecoat over her dress.

‘Grüss Gott.’

‘Grüss Gott,’ Clare’s mother replies. ‘Es ist ein schöner Tag.’

‘Ja, Ja.’

Clare hauls her suitcase from the boot of the car and follows her parents towards the farmhouse. Her brothers are already running around the big field next to the house.

Inside, the farmhouse is dark. There is a reek of hay and cows that seems to permeate everything. They follow the old woman up the steep wooden stairs and on to the first floor, where she opens the door to a bedroom and ushers them in.

‘This must be ours,’ says Clare’s mother, looking over the double bed with its faded orange cover.

The old woman is chattering away in German, but the language seems to bear little resemblance the German Clare is learning at school. The old woman backs out of the room and gestures to Clare.

‘Kommen Sie, kommen Sie.’

On the next floor, the old woman opens the door to a smaller room. Clare looks around. There is hardly space to move between the three single beds. There is no sign of a shower or even a wash basin. The old woman shuffles her way between the beds and wrestles with the small window. At last, she forces it open and a breeze blows through the stuffy room.

‘Das ist besser, ya?’

When Clare comes downstairs a few minutes later, her mother and father are sitting at a table on the veranda. Clare has searched the upper floor but can’t find anything more than a small stuffy toilet. ‘Mum, there’s no shower. You said the place had all mod cons.’

‘Lost in translation I’m afraid. You’ll just have to have flannel baths, like your father and I did when we were young. We’re only here for a couple of nights. I’m sure you’ll survive.’

An old man Clare assumes must be the farmer comes up the steps onto the veranda and nods to them. He is dressed in muck-stained overalls and rubber boots. He goes into the house, then returns with a tray of schnapps, offering a glass to each of Clare’s parents before raising his own in a toast.

‘Prost. Diana und Charles.’

*Der Jäger* is almost empty. It is dark and smells of something slightly rotten. A young man in farming overalls is playing on a fruit machine by the door. Every so often the machine chings or warbles out a tune.

‘Guten abend.’ A girl in a dirndl with a long, decorated skirt appears from behind the bar and guides them to a large table in the corner of the room. Clare thinks she must be about eighteen. Her eyelashes are heavy with mascara and her eyeliner accentuates her almost black eyes. The girl hands round five big leatherbound menus. Clare wonders how it feels to wear a dirndl, how the bodice must tighten against the stomach, how it makes the girl’s breasts seem to spill magically from the top. She notices her father’s eyes darting up to the girl’s chest.

‘Und zum Trinken?’

‘Clare’s father looks at her mother. ‘Shall we have a bottle, Darling? How about some Riesling?

‘Ya, Riesling, we have some of that,’ the girl says in a thick Austrian accent.

‘Ah, you speak English,’ Clare’s father replies. ‘How wonderful.’

‘Danke. And to eat?’

Her father orders a steak while her mother asks for her usual omelette.

‘And for you?’ the girl asks, turning to Clare.

Clare looks down the menu, its gothic script and German words blurring.

‘Einer salat platte, bitter.’ She hands the leather-bound menu to the waitress, then watches as her two brothers try to order their wiener schnitzels.

Her mother is smoking, one elbow on the table, the cigarette held almost vertically in her hand. She takes a drag, turns her head away and exhales. Clare hates the smell, the way it clings to everything, even her clothes. Her mother’s brown floral blouse reminds Clare of old curtains. At the end of term, everyone at school was talking about Diana’s dress. Would the taffeta be ivory or white? How long would the train be? In photos, Clare’s mother’s wedding dress is plain and she has a strange arrangement of flowers in her hair. The relatives standing around her seem to come from another age: old ladies with wire-rimmed glasses and fox stoles, men in baggy war time-suits, their hair brill-creamed to within an inch of its life. Diana’s wedding will be nothing like that, she is sure.

When Clare’s salad comes it is huge, sliced boiled eggs piled on top of a mound of lettuce with grated carrots, beetroot and tomatoes, more than she can possibly eat. Her father is cutting into a piece of steak that almost covers the plate. Blood oozes out, thick with bubbles of grease. Clare watches as he lifts a forkful to his mouth. She remembers waking up at dawn in the car somewhere in Italy on the journey here. Her parents were both asleep in the front seats, her father’s head tipped back, his mouth open. She could smell the sourness of his breath, see the rows of silver fillings, the strange redness of the inside of his mouth.

‘Are you from London?’ the waitress asks later as she clears away the plates.

‘We certainly are,’ her father replies, leaning back in his chair and smiling broadly. ‘And what is your name?’

‘Eva. I have always wanted to go to London. It is so boring here. And you have Diana. Soon she will be a princess.’

‘Boring, *boring*?’ Clare’s mother sounds genuinely shocked. ‘But you have the mountains, all this beauty.’

The girl rolls her eyes. ‘What use is beauty when there’s nothing to do? In London there are bands, parties, nightclubs.’ The girl pauses as she reaches for Clare’s plate. Clare is sure she has eaten loads, but the plate still seems full.

‘Have you finished?’

Clare sees her mother look away. ‘I think so,’ Clare mutters, almost under her breath.

‘Would you like any dessert?’

‘Rather!’ says Clare’s father.

On the drive back to the farmhouse the lights of the car sweep the woods with each turn, the nearest trees glowing bright green for a second, before being swallowed by the darkness. Robbie and Toby doze on either side of Clare on the back seat, worn out by the long day and the big meal. When they reach the farmhouse, her mother lights up another cigarette and stands puffing smoke into the cool air.

Clare’s father lifts the sleeping Toby out of the car. ‘Can you wake Robbie and get him up to bed?’

Clare tries to lift Robbie, but he is too heavy for her to carry. ‘Robbie, Robbie,’ she whispers in his ear.

Robbie stirs. He has drooled on his t-shirt. He smells of home and childhood.

‘Come on, it’s bedtime.’

‘Are we home?’ he mutters.

‘No, but we will be soon. Let’s get you into bed’.

Without fully opening his eyes, Robbie slides out of the car and walks, as if in a trance, to the house.

The glare from the swimming pool hurts her eyes. Although everything is bright, the sky is a dark blue she has never seen before. The tops of the mountains seem to loom over the valley, they are so high. White patches of snow catch the sun. She puts her sunglasses on and lies down on her towel. She can feel the heat of the paving stones on her back, the damp of her swimsuit already evaporating. The hot smell of the wet paving stones mixes with chlorine and the scent of suntan oil. She is conscious of her breasts in her swimsuit, the way they rise under the material, the lack of a bra. Her body seems to have a will of its own these days. ‘Be proud, Darling,’ her mother said. ‘You’re becoming a woman.’ She is aware of boys looking at her differently, and sometimes men too. In the pool she felt almost naked, aware of all the bodies around her, the small slips of material covering breasts, penises, vaginas. She rolls over onto her front, partly to escape the light, partly to flatten herself against the stone. At least she will be able to have a shower in the changing rooms.

She hears the *click* *click* of her mother’s lighter.

Suddenly Clare hears the thud of running feet on the paving stones and a shower of cold water splashes across her back.

She looks up into the bright sun. ‘Toby, you little sod.’. Her brother is standing over her, grinning.

‘Come on boys.’ Her mother gets off her sun lounger. ‘It’s time to get going. You all need to have a proper shower before we go.’

In the changing room, Clare follows the arrows to the *Dusche*. But when she reaches the end of a corridor, she realises that there are no shower cubicles. Two large women are naked under the showers. One of them is vigorously soaping her armpits, her huge breasts swinging above her stomach. Clare glances down at the woman’s fat dimpled thighs, the scraggy patch of hair between her legs, feels something churn in her stomach. Clutching her towel and washbag, she turns and hurries back to the changing room.

On the veranda lunch has been laid out. Clare looks at the pink slices of ham heating in the sun, the bowl of fat pickles soaking in vinegar. Her brothers happily chew into the thick white rolls. The old woman bustles about. She smells of sweat. Clare imagines thick underclothes and stained, wrinkled stockings under the faded floral dress.

By the time they have finished the main course, her parents are on their second bottle of wine.

‘The trouble with the English abroad,’ her mother is saying loudly, ‘is that they have no respect for the authentic culture. When I go abroad I don’t want to be stuck in some ghastly hotel with a load of other Brits. And I certainly don’t want to watch the bloody royal wedding. We may not have showers here, but we do have this,’ and she opens her arms, spilling yellow wine onto the white tablecloth.

‘Christ Maggie, keep a lid on it,’ her father mutters.

‘Why? Why should I? Can’t we release ourselves from our buttoned-up Englishness here? Didn’t Lawrence come to the alps on his savage pilgrimage? What about ‘Bavarian Gentians?

“And Persephone herself is but a voice, as a bride, a gloom invisible enfolded in the deeper dark of the arms of Pluto as he ravishes her once again.”’

Her father rolls his eyes, then takes another drink. Clare looks down at the wooden floor, relieved that at least the old couple can’t speak any English.

‘What does ‘radishes’ mean?’ Robbie asks.

Clare’s one hope is the small black and white TV in the farmhouse kitchen. The next morning on the veranda at breakfast she can already hear it murmuring in the background. Perhaps she can persuade her parents to let her stay in and watch the wedding while they go for a walk with the boys. But then her father suggests they all have lunch at *Der Jäger*.

‘It’s the last day of our holiday. We can walk down to work up an appetite.’

‘What about the wedding?’ Clare pleads, looking at both her parents in turn.

‘Oh Darling,’ her mother says, ‘there are more important things to experience than a church full of toffs doffing their caps to some long-ago redundant institution. You’ll realise that when you’re older and then you’ll thank us for bringing you here. I’m glad to say that *Der Jäger* is TV-free, whatever its other shortcomings.’

‘Come on Clare,’ her father joins in. ‘This might be our last family holiday together. By next year you probably won’t want to come away with your stuffy old parents.’

All morning Clare hovers outside the kitchen. The old couple are sitting at the small table, murmuring to one another. On the TV Clare catches glimpses of the crowds lining the streets in London, hands clutching Union Jacks. At about 11.30, eight gilded carriages emerge from Buckingham Palace and slowly make their way down the Mall. Clare is still watching the procession when the rest of the family come downstairs.

‘Time to go, Darling,’ her mother calls as she passes.

The boys run ahead, darting into the trees, then jumping out on Clare and her parents. Clare thinks of all her friends at home, glued to their TVs. She checks her watch. It is already nearly twelve. That means that in England it will be eleven. The wedding will be starting at any minute. The woods that seemed mysterious and romantic yesterday are now just so many trees, each bend in the road taking her further away from any possibility of the TV.

When they reach the village, the square is busy. A row of little red trucks is lined up next to the church. People are filtering into *Der Jäger*. Clare’s father opens the big wooden door and ushers the family in. The difference is immediately obvious. On the bar sits a huge television, its picture lighting up the dark interior. The pub is almost full, tables occupied by farmers in their overalls, their wives still in their housecoats. The commentary in German blares out of the television.

‘Oh God, let’s get out of here,’ her mother says, turning to go.

At that moment the Eva appears. ‘You would like to eat?’

For a moment Clare’s father seems unsure, then breaks into a broad smile. ‘Of course we would.’

‘Philip,’ her mother snaps, but her father is already making his way to the only available table, squashed into a corner next to the kitchen.

From where she is sitting, Clare can just about see what is happening. The wedding is already over. The carriage carrying Diana and Charles is arriving at Buckingham Palace. Diana’s dress is huge, with puffed sleeves and a long train that has to be unfolded from the carriage as she steps out. For a moment, Diana pauses and smiles at the camera, that radiant smile that says complete happiness.

Clare’s father has ordered a bottle of wine. ‘Come on Maggie, at least have a drink,’ he says, pushing a full glass towards Clare’s mother.

When Eva comes back, Clare orders her food as quickly as she can. She bobs her head to see past the waitress. Diana and Charles are coming on to the balcony at the palace. Charles rather stiffly raises his arm and waves.

‘The sooner we get out of here, the better.’ Her mother is sipping at her wine, glancing around the room suspiciously.

Clare can just hear the crowd in the background chanting something. Then she realises what they are saying: ‘Kiss her, kiss her.’ Charles looks embarrassed and leans over to the Queen to say something. Then he leans in to kiss Diana. Their heads come together and there is an audible sigh in *Der Jäger*. But something is wrong. It is tiny, but Clare notices it. As Diana’s lips reach up, she closes her eyes. But Charles keeps his open and his lips don’t quite meet hers: they slide off to one side. Then their heads part and they turn to face the crowd again, a huge cheer erupting from the TV.

Eva arrives with a big tray and places Clare’s omelette in front of her.

‘Are you still keen on coming to England?’ her father says.

‘Ya. Anything to get out of this place.’

‘I’m sure we could arrange something, couldn’t we Maggie.’

Clare’s mother is smoking, looking away at the other side of the room.

‘Are you any good at looking after children? We’ve got these three, and their mother has got a lot on her hands.’

‘Really?’ Eva looks uncertainly at Clare’s mother, then back at her father.

‘Yes, why not? We could give you room and board, a little bit of cash, that sort of thing.’

‘That would be wonderful. And I could perhaps teach the children some German.’

Clare looks at the television. Charles and Diana have gone and the balcony is empty.

‘Are you free this afternoon? Why don’t you come up to the Müller’s? We can talk then.’

‘Eva.’ The barman is calling the girl over to the bar.

‘Ya, Ya’. Eva turns back for a moment. ‘Thank you so much.’

Her parents walk back up to the farmhouse locked in an argument. It’s hot and windless and the boys straggle behind, Robbie moaning. Clare stops to wait for him, then takes hold of his hand.

When they get to the farmhouse, her mother turns to the boys. ‘Right, who wants to go for a walk in the woods?’

‘I’m tired,’ Robbie says.

‘No time to be tired now, come on.’ As she guides the boys towards the trees, she turns to Clare’s father. ‘You can tell her she isn’t coming, and that’s final.’

In her room, Clare lies on the bed. She tries to read, but she can’t concentrate, so she closes her eyes. She can feel the sweat on her upper lip. She thinks back to Charles and Diana’s kiss, then tries to imagine what kissing a boy must be like. Daniel Stevens tried to kiss her once, but she turned away as his lips came towards hers. Half asleep, she imagines John Travolta’s full lips. How would they feel? But instead, Eva’s lips come into her mind. Then Eva is standing over her, bending down and kissing her on the mouth. Clare can feel the heat of Eva’s skin, smell her perfume. Intense, unexpected waves of pleasure spread through her body.

She wakes confused, unsure where she is. The house is silent. She gets up and goes downstairs. On the veranda table are two half-full glasses. Clare scans the field and the woods but can’t see anyone. She wanders down to the side of the house. The sun is fierce, her head throbbing in the heat. The hanging baskets which line the first storey veranda are dripping with water where the old woman has watered them. At the back of the house, Clare peers into the barn, which reeks of manure and molasses. She can sense the forms of cows shifting in the coolness, hear the swish of their tails. Stepping into the darkness, she tries to avoid the cow pats littering the concrete floor. Slowly her eyes adjust to the dimness and she begins to make out the cows in their stalls, each big head munching at the hay bagged up at the front of the stall. There is something comforting about the cows, their solidity, the way they move their ponderous heads. She wants to reach out and touch one, but she is scared that it might jump suddenly.

She can hear footsteps and voices. She is about to go and see who it is, when Eva is silhouetted at the entrance to the barn. She is still in her dirndl and full skirt. Her father’s silhouette appears beside Eva’s, his hand reaching out to take hers. Clare instinctively backs into the darkness. Her father’s hands is stroking Eva’s cheek, as if he is calming a frightened animal. Then he kisses her, his arms going around her body.

‘No.’ Clare wonders who has shouted, then realises it is her own voice.

Eva struggles free and darts out of the barn.

‘Clare?’ Her father moves towards her, trying to see her in the dimness. Clare retreats, kicking over a bucket, milk spilling out onto the dirty concrete, turning green as it runs away. She backs into a door, feels for the wooden latch, then rushes through the doorway.

Closing the door behind her, Clare realises she is in the hallway of the farmhouse. She hurries towards the stairs, but meets her father coming through the front door.

‘I don’t know what you think you saw there, Clare, but it’s not what you imagine. I promise you.’ Her father reaches out for her, as if he can soothe her like a little child who has had a bad dream.

‘Leave me alone.’ Clare ducks under his arms and slips up the stairs.

At that moment Clare’s mother comes through the door with Toby and Robbie in tow. ‘Oh, I see she’s gone. Well, that’s that then. Now boys, come on upstairs and have a wash. You’re covered in sweat and god-knows what else.’

After they eat a silent supper of rolls and soup in the stuffy farmhouse kitchen that evening, her father leaves the room.

When the boys have gone to bed, Clare tries to concentrate on her novel. Muffled voices rise up from her parents’ bedroom, her mother’s raised, her father’s lower, trying to calm her. Then there is a loud bang, like a door slamming, and the voices go quiet.

Clare gets out of bed and goes to the small window. She pulls back the curtain. She can just make out the figure of her mother in front of the house, her cigarette glowing, looking out over the dark valley where a few lights still glimmer.

By nine thirty the next morning the car is packed. Clare’s father has, as usual, spent twenty minutes rearranging the suitcases until he is satisfied that there is not an inch to spare in the boot. Since they came down to breakfast, her parents have been acting as if nothing has happened.

The farmer and his wife stand side by side on the veranda.

‘Danke schon, danke schon,’ Clare’s mother gushes. ‘Das war sehr gemütlich.’

‘Bitter schon, danke,’ the old lady answers.

‘Come on then boys, we’ve got a long drive ahead of us.’ Clare’s father opens the rear door of the car, and Toby and Robbie climb in.

‘Clare?’ Her mother is getting into the front passenger seat. ‘Can you keep order in the back please?’

As they descend the road towards the village, a blast of orchestral music fills the car.

The village square is deserted again. But as they pass *Der Jäger*, Eva emerges from the doorway with a mop and bucket in her hand. She is dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, her hair in a ponytail. She seems younger, her breasts hidden in the loose material of the T-shirt, her dark eyes smaller without make-up. She looks up as the car passes, but only Clare seems to notice her. Clare half raises her hand to wave, but Eva just stares back at the car.

At the T-Junction, her father pauses, indicator clicking. He turns down the music. ‘Everyone OK?’

‘Of course, Darling.’ Clare’s mother reaches across and places a hand on her husband’s leg.