

Martha

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He was in the pool, cooling off. From this distance Martha could see what had aroused her to him. Naked, from behind, Philippe had almost the body of a boy. Smooth, hairless, firm. His strokes in the pool lengthened once he got into his stride and, on lookout from above, one could catch the full span of his arms and the crisp turnout of his legs. Having spent uncountable hours outdoors on the decks of boats, Philippe had a rock-of-ages face, furrowed and sculpted by sun damage, darkly wise-looking. Yet the sailing also accounted for a fatless torso, brown and defined and unmarked. Martha called him her lean-breasted chicken. Handy with a rope, he'd provided Martha with much needed ingenuity after a dull patch but it had been a while since Philippe had floated Martha's boat and, spitefully, she suspected he knew this. For some reason Martha couldn't fathom, Philippe held on to his married lover like a dog by the side of its dying master. How typically Belgian, Martha thought – staying with an adulteress out of loyalty.

Philippe eased himself out of the water and lay face up on the terracotta border. He waited for the wetness to drain from his skin. Here there was only sex, the odd thunderstorm and a fight after a few Martinis. The pool was really very small compensation for open water. He missed the boat. He had sailed with Martha once but she found the cabin claustrophobic and said the motion left her unfocused. When it was time to come poolside, he made clear his intention to stay with the yacht. His decision lasted three days.

Philippe loved Martha but she would have to learn. The struggles had become more frequent recently, although they had decreased in intensity with practice. He stretched the palms of his hands and felt water drop down between his fingers. Martha was watching from the window, he could be sure of that. He proceeded to rub his belly dry with one hand, massaging the few silvery hairs around his navel. Then gradually he made a circular path under his bathers and into the furry down of hair there, sliding across the penis. In a gesture deliberately designed to displease, Philippe swiftly scooped up his genitals as if to reposition them then used both hands to

vigorously scratch his head. He knew this would suffice to cause a narrowing of the eyes. Not a hanging offence but satisfyingly irritating. Better the devil you know, thought Philippe, and far easier to win the argument. He breathed in jasmine and closed his eyes, slipping into sleep.

The following day, Martha ran the net along the side of the pool, fishing out the few twigs, leaves and insects which had settled there overnight. She had left the bed early to be there and delighted in the meditative action of dredging cadavers. Satisfied, Martha hung up the pole and went to the house. Philippe was standing naked in the kitchen.

'It's still warm', he gestured towards the cafetiere. 'I'm going for a swim'.

Martha topped up Philippe's cup until it overflowed, spilling onto his feet. She looked at his dick.

Martha surprised herself later by kissing Philippe. That night, she prepared dinner. She sat across from her man, leaning in as he sat back to dab his mouth. She sucked an artichoke leaf in through her lips, spattering oil on her chin. Philippe rocked on the chair and laughed.

Martha resumed writing. She wrote of alpine exploration, picturing the freezing sensation of snow at her cuffs belying a burning sun reflected from all angles. She followed a little goat into a crevice and found the most beautiful of mountain botanicals – a cream blossom with cobalt edges. "One hundred of them here but perhaps the only one hundred on the face of the earth...!" Philippe brought Martha plates of fruit and cheese so she could continue to write into the night. Days later, they returned to a familiar chapter. Martha was spoiling for a fight and Philippe was smoking menthols. *Slam!* Another door was punished. *Whack!* The thesaurus got what for.

Philippe began a new journey plan, sailing from Sicily to Tunisia and around the Mediterranean coast of Africa. He thought of years spent washing decks as a teenager and nights listening





to adult conversations in the cabin, a lamp rocking gently above a bottle and three glasses. He had imagined one day telling this to his own son, perhaps encouraging him to recreate the experience for himself. But Philippe's son lived in Italy and had not spoken to him at length about anything other than his own small children's progress for over ten years. The grandchildren, whom Philippe had met with twice, did not speak French. His relationship with his son's Dutch mother, like most of his relationships with women, had been brief, intense and a spectacular failure. And now he was in a Slovenian village, unable to communicate to anyone but Martha, and she spoke less than she spat these days. A married woman. Of course, he didn't believe one bit of that. Philippe hung on as much to see when the truth would emerge as anything else. He scratched between his toes and waited for something spectacular.

In the upstairs room Martha lay beneath the windows watching trees sway in and out of her line of vision like corpses at sea. After appearing with the comforting regularity of a shit in the morning, the writing came no longer and she felt a bloated sense of inadequacy. She wished Philippe would go. No longer did she crave a display ending, she just needed to digest. She slept on the floor into nightfall.

Philippe drank from a glass tumbler. Long, cool measures of bottled water, one after the other

taken with purpose. He was up to a litre. This, he told his slippered and cardiganed friends, was the secret to his youthfulness. Two point five litres per day and a basic moisturiser for the entire body. A good, even tan covered the odd lump and crease, and since the seventies told of a leisured rather than a laboured lifestyle. Philippe viewed his skin as a saddlemaker views a prime hide: something which must move in sympathy with and reassure the body beneath it while also conveying quality, craftsmanship and beauty to those who would ride it. While he snorted a little at his crudity, the front door could be heard closing.

The main aspect of the house was dark when Martha entered her car. She lit the ignition and pulled the motor up through the grass and dirt, between the laurel bushes and away from the day's non-events. If Philippe hadn't heard her leave she would make sure to surprise him on her way back. She smiled thinly at the thought of the show to come and enjoyed the feeling of her heart quickening.

The road to town was dead and dark for a good few kilometers. Martha sped on spraying dust. She was aware of the tap of insects beating their last on the windshield. She left the moon far behind her and flew forward in the black, headlamps turned down. She fantasised about crashing into a beast. A deer striding into the road, unaware of where the woodland left off; a chicken flown from its coop, pecking out; a drunken man. Her forehead smashed on the wheel, nails white with shock. Martha imagined herself coming to, the blankness of the road in front and behind, the motor still running. She wouldn't look; she'd pull on over the bump not knowing what had been hit nor to what consequence.

In the house, Philippe was reading in an upstairs room. He found Martha's prose almost interminably dull but, seeing himself at times as her analyst, liked to browse. He read her latest – a Riefenstahl-like celebration of alpine grandeur littered with obvious metaphors of sexual awakening. He wondered if he could do anything to help. His eyes skimmed over her first and second novels, the third a self-publication due to its 'avant' nature, Martha had told him. An unpublishable 80-page volume of poetry; a screenplay. Then, without warning or reason, Philippe let out a huge, tearless sob.

The town square was as dim as those who inhabited it. Drunken farmhands long divested





of the luxury of being able to separate their own lives from those of their employers. One man leered at Martha as she approached the club door, spittle highlighting his chin. Martha leered back. Inside, the club glowed red and green as Christmas, the lights crisscrossing each other and splaying on the dance floor. Martha leant by the bar. She watched girls in short dresses and boys in black shoes.

She watched a woman of around twenty shift between two men. One rubbed his crotch in circular movements at her backside, otherwise hardly touching her. The woman looked to one side in acknowledgement then back to the boy facing her. His hair was shaved close to his skull and his head glistened wet as if freshly showered. His eyes spread wide open then closed as he fell into the heat. His white T-shirt billowed around him as he moved, throwing his arms up and down in a Tarantella, oblivious that his girlfriend had moved across the room with a different man. Martha caught the boy by the wrist and spun him twice so he became like a spring coiled in close to her.

They stood together, breath meeting breath.

Philippe was sitting by the pool trying out a cigarette he'd found in a drawer when Martha returned. Tires on the gravel, he inhaled; the sound of a car door shutting, twice, he let it out slowly. A fine mist of rain blew in, covering him in a light spritz, rippling the pool. He stretched out his old legs, half-lit by the kitchen lamp, and flexed his toes. Directly above him another light came on and the bedroom window was flung up. Philippe listened to snatches of schoolboy English and Martha's laugh while, dampening, he finished his smoke.

In the bedroom Martha was trying to seduce her conquest. The boy from the disco stood awkwardly in the centre of the room looking around at Martha's possessions.

'I like very much your room', he attempted.

'The oldest part of the building is 200 years old', Martha replied, realising at once that such detail was unnecessary.



'Can I please close the window?' The boy was frowning. The smell of smoke wafted into the room and a thin rainfall was straying across their necks like sea har. Martha shut the window with deliberate force and approached the boy. 'Let me dry you off.' She ran her hands over his arms and placed them around her waist. They held one another.

The rain didn't stop all night and fell in heavy beats on the shutters. Martha woke shivering and found herself in her underwear above the sheets. The boy lay buried in a pillow next to her, fully clothed. Martha looked at him, how sweet he was. She ran a finger down his forehead to his nose and the boy's eyes opened. He turned sleepily then took off from the bed, startled. 'I have the girlfriend', he declared. Martha felt another movement beside her and found Philippe, unclothed, at the wall-edge of the mattress. The boy left.

The hot days had vanished; in their place, wet days and breezy evenings. In such conditions the pool was heavy maintenance and they had covered it. They seemed to have given up on arguing too. Disagreements, the few there were, melted into momentary sulks, remedied by a glass of wine or a nap. 'Where's your husband?' Philippe had said one day, direct as a school bell.

'I'm leaving him,' said Martha, thinking that was all she needed to say on the fictional marriage matter.

'For me?'

Martha's eyes darted to the side. A spider was hanging upside down by a thread, working, spinning. To all appearances they seemed to be married to each other. They ate together, chastely shared a bed and barely spoke; that just about covered it as far as Martha (who had never held high expectations of married life) was concerned. Her eyes rolled in their sockets.

Philippe didn't ask any more questions. He spent his time studying the sailing charts he had brought with him from France, tracing their outlines and drawing routes in multiple colours of ink. Laid one on top of the other, the maps Philippe made were a kaleidoscopic palimpsest, the document of his life. Sometimes they would sit, he and Martha, in the same room, quietly scribbling. When Philippe had completed a tricky strait he would hold the transparent paper up to the light and spy Martha through it, writing. One time he'd looked up and she was there all at once smiling at him. A clear and sparkling realisation came to Philippe. Martha needed to be with him in the room as she wrote. Martha, he concluded in a moment, was in love with his charts, his aging skin, his persistence. She mused upon him.

The week filled with looking. Martha upon Philippe and Philippe upon Martha. They locked into hours of silent game play. Neither wanted the other to catch them watching. As Martha's writing patterns grew more consistent, Philippe's drawings took on a less precise form. The landforms he had copied fastidiously



twenty times over now lost their distinctiveness. The Normandy coast became an unbroken curve; Greece a stumpy foothold on the Mediterranean. His hand slowed.

He could see Martha watching his fingertips smooth down the paper. He moved position so the light wouldn't catch the back of his hands. He hated the brown blotches that had appeared there, the rivulets around them where veins poked through. Had he lost weight? His arms were bony. His shoulders hadn't substance. But there was flab around his middle. Philippe took to wearing a shirt, one that could fall loosely over his waist. 'Take that shirt off,' said Martha, a pen in her mouth, post-dinner one evening. 'I want to see you as you are.' Philippe obeyed, thinking it foreplay. His full belly flopped before them. Martha laughed and returned the pen to her notebook to carry on with the infernal scribbling. Philippe retired to bed and slept, dreaming of an empty page.

Martha hadn't been this productive in years. Her writing was furious, grasping, but she spun the tale easily. She had turned on to her surroundings: the soft damp in the wood which held up the windows; the smell of the cedar block in the downstairs closet; shade. And yet, even with this new sensory capacity, she felt all head. Martha's mind expanded elegantly in all spaces while her flesh could naturally only stand, sit or lie. Martha thought goblins had come one night and invaded her limbs. She wrote without knowing how her fingers jerked nor how her wrist moved across the page. Words formed immediate pictograms. She transformed what she saw and gave it active purpose. A glass held poison, a table would become a birthing bed, the pool was a dock for cargo vessels, the gate a prison. She wrote what she saw and whom. She wrote the man in front of her and decided to call him Philip.

Fever broke across Martha's forehead. She draped a scarf over her head and wrapped the ends around her neck. Heat flew across her cheeks and down into her chest, leaving Martha shivering. Philippe found her a blanket and drew water for her to drink, saying, 'You must take more to be well.' Martha saw his freckled arm move slowly across the page with the glass. The glass stayed there, full, until morning.

Martha slept a lot. In the waking hours she wrote: *Philip is setting out on an expedition*. Night terrors consumed the time in between. Awakening with a deep, long scream in her

lungs but a cork in the throat, Martha couldn't recall from whence her anxiety had come or what images she was leaping from. She knew only the sense of contagion which troubled her as she woke. Philippe told her to rest, cocooned her in sheets. Martha purged by writing and held her notepads to her like holy tablets.

'The keys to the car, Martha', Philippe said. 'There's nothing left to bloody eat.' Martha stared forward and drifted inside herself, rocking sickly without sea legs back to a quiet place. She couldn't quite remember their last meal.

'How will you drive without hands?' she asked.

The writing grew slower and more laboured, but deliberate. Philippe could be heard in the bathroom upstairs washing and brushing, or treading the landing. He checked on Martha who had become thinner but was no longer sweating pools. She knew every soft inch of him and could predict when and how he would come, where next he would go, if he would touch or kiss her, how everything would be between them from today until tomorrow.

In full recovery, Martha continued. The book wouldn't be a bestseller – it would barely leave the libraries – but it would reassure her agent and give her a little publicity, perhaps even a literary reputation. With these happy thoughts Martha finished up before eleven and climbed the stairs to bed for the first time in over a week.

The morning came with wind and certain cold. Leaves sped up the walls to scratch and spatter on the glass. The shutters rattled, reminding Martha the hinges needed checked. Birds had taken shelter in the chimney breast and called down into the hearth. Martha was wide awake and hungry. She stepped into jeans and a shirt, pulled on a warm pair of socks and listened to air whistle through a worn draft excluder. She shuffled lightly downstairs and to the kitchen where she made a cupful of coffee using the last grounds. A rummage through the cupboards was rewarded with a packet of five oatcakes and some blackberry jam which she found a little enthusiasm for and swallowed with her coffee. She'd make a trip to town later and stock up on food and basics. Martha added her cup and plate to the dishes stacked beside the sink.

She took to the sitting room, folded her



blanket and gathered her notes. She tied a scarf around her neck and readied to leave for town. There was a scraping sound in the corridor, as if a door was being planed. The *scccrritch* was accompanied by a *pad-pad* and grew louder as Martha adjusted her hair in front of the mirror. *Scccritch pad-pad, scccritch pad-pad . . .* A pin had fallen on the floor and lay gathering fluff by the skirting. Martha returned it to its duty holding the upper left hand corner of a large map to the wall. She ran her hand across the paper to flatten it before repining. *Scccritch pad.*

In the doorway was a creature. Evenly coloured and smooth, on his elbows and knees,

neck straining upwards. The shriveled ends of his forearms lay in protective stumps at either side of a plate, proudly dressed with apples and a lump of gruyere. Martha avoided the scene and looked at the names of the waters on the map – Chukchi Sea, the Banda, the Marmara – and the tiny sketch of the Armada sailing through the English Channel which had so fascinated her when she bought it. She glanced around the room then stepped over the distraction into the kitchen, rattling her keys as she went. She looked out onto the back garden noticing for the first time this year the autumn debris which covered the ground. Then she made her way out by the front door.

