

There are days when it feels really cold in here.

I'll admit, I hope it doesn't get much colder, because then I might have to move and I don't want to move. I'm OK where I am. I like lying in the dark and listening to the wind.

I've begun to believe, anyway, that the cold comes from inside me, not from outside. Moving might not change a thing. Because it's like some kind of frost has got into me. It's forming icy crystals along my spine. It's telling me that time is going along differently in me and making me old in the space of this one winter.

Not that I care, really. I don't want to talk about the present. It's Valentina I want to talk about. She's the only subject that's in my mind.

I think I'll start with something else, though. I'll start with the moment when I noticed that my mother had become a beautiful woman.

I once thought beauty was something only found in old paintings. It never really occurred to me that ordinary people could be beautiful, here and now. And then I saw – that day in July – that they could be and that my mother was one of them.

She was sitting in my room, by my window, trying to mend my Action Man, whose name was Elroy. Or at least, it *had been* Elroy. But now Elroy's torso had parted from his pelvis, so I personally knew that he was dead and finished and I told Mum not to bother with him. I never played with him any more. But she took no notice of me. She just sat there, very intent, like a lacemaker or like a mathematician, with the sun on her

crazy hair, trying to bring Elroy back into existence. And that's when I noticed it: the fantastic, gorgeous beauty of my mother, Alice Little.

She was thirty-seven and I was thirteen. She'd had me when she was twenty-four. The birth had been easy, everyone said, because I was so small, such an absolute *pune*. I weighed about five pounds. In the photograph they took of me in the nursing home, I look like a piece of Play Doh. I'm amazed anyone wanted to keep me. Under the photograph, some nurse has written *Baby Lewis, aged three days*. It's embarrassing to think I started out so pathetically. Luckily, parents don't see you as you are. What they see is beauty.

It was the day before we left our house in Devon and went to Paris. I could describe it as the day before my real life began. Mum was wearing a little mauve skimpy top and a drapey kind of skirt she'd bought from an Indian shop. Elroy, in his Royal Marines uniform, lay on this skirt and his motionless blue eyes looked up at Mum's hair, which is extremely startling kind of hair, like a red thorn tree. Her arms are freckled and she told me that when she was a little girl growing up in Scotland she used to believe that freckles were in the air, like snow, and fell on your arms and on your nose when you went roller-skating on summer afternoons. She used to try to wash them off in the bath with a loofah.

She had to give up on Elroy, as I knew she would. Everything plastic is difficult to mend. Nothing bonds with it. So I kicked him under my bed to lie in the darkness and dust and I thought, that darkness and dust that he's lying in, there's something else in it too: it's the boy I was when I imagined Elroy was real.

On the plane taking us to Paris, I saw that other people had noticed Mum's beauty. They sat in their blue-and-red airline seats, watching her. Not just the men. I saw the women wondering if her thorn-tree hair was really growing out of her scalp.

The man sitting next to Mum on the aisle side had been so

disturbed by her that he was having difficulty opening the little foil packet of peanuts he'd been given with his drink. He began to tear at the peanut packet with his teeth. He tore so frantically that peanuts exploded over his drinks table and cascaded down into his silk-suited lap. He was Italian and he swore under his breath. Italian swearing sounds as if it's the dirtiest language on earth, as if the swearer's tongue is licking the grating over a drain.

Then I got out the brand-new notebook my father had given me before we left and wrote in it the first of all the things I came to write down in the coming weeks. The notebook was bought at the airport Smith's and had a photograph of Concorde on it. 'There you are, Lewis,' my father had said: 'Concorde.' 'Oh, great,' I said. 'Thanks. Brilliant.' Except that we weren't *on* Concorde. We were on some enormous jumbo plane about ten seats wide. The stewards wore draylon shirts. At the back was a gaggle of babies, mewling. It wasn't the best place in the sky to be.

'What are you writing?' asked Alice.

'Nothing much,' I said. 'Just a private theory.'

I called it *Lewis Little's Exploding Peanut Theory of Beauty*. Its first premise was: *Beauty causes alteration. I'm talking about the beauty of women. Alteration may frequently result in some accident or other. These accidents might be small and of no significance (cf. the Italian in the aisle seat) or they might be important, even a life-or-death matter. Alice Little, my mother, has come into the category of beautiful women. (NB: she may have been there for a while without my noticing.) Ergo, it's probable that she is going to be the cause of an accident of some kind in the near future. This probability is heightened by the fact that the near future is going to take place in Paris.*

Ours wasn't a family which ever did really interesting things. We would never have thought up the idea of going to Paris. We would have stayed in Devon that summer as usual and flown

our bird kite on the windy cliffs and gone shrimping in rock pools.

But then came the call from Valentina. I answered the telephone one Sunday in May while Mum and Dad were in the pub and I was doing my history homework and Valentina said to me: 'Listen, darling. I must have your mother here this summer. That's it, you know. You must persuade her to come, Lewis. I'm sure she does everything you ask, because that is what the mothers of clever sons do. I'm counting on you.'

I used to be a very accommodating little boy. When I was still made of Play Doh, people were able to mould me to fit their whims and desires, but now I was going through a phase of disliking being counted on. So later I said to Mum, 'Valentina wants you to go to Paris in the holidays, but I don't want you to. Don't go, will you?'

I remember that Mum sat down and took my hand and stroked it with the back of hers, like she was trying to snow me with freckles. 'If I go,' she said, 'will you come with me?'

I'd been to Brittany once, but never to Paris. All I could remember of France was a high wind and a vast hotel and the salty smell of oysters. And I remembered Valentina. She'd been with us in the vast hotel and worn gold jewellery at breakfast. She'd been born in Russia, but had lived in Paris for thirty-eight of her forty-one years. She'd told me that her only memory of her Russian life was standing in a maize field and looking up at the moon.

'Where would we live?' I asked.

And then I was told that it was all already planned. This is what parents are in the habit of doing: they pretend to ask you a question when really they're giving you an order.

Mum told me that Valentina had a huge apartment and we would stay there with her – just Mum and me. Dad didn't want to come. He had a summer 'project'. Dad was a school-teacher and the word 'project' gave him a kind of gladness of heart. But he wanted us to go. He was all for it, in fact. He

told Mum that he thought it was a good idea to introduce me to a great European city.

I said: 'What will I do in this great European city while you and Valentina are working?'

Still snowing my hand with freckles, Mum said: 'Well, you'll discover things. Your French is good and now you'll be able to perfect it.'

'Who will I perfect it with?'

'I don't know. Valentina's friends. You'll meet people your own age, too. And they play chess in the parks. You could talk to the chess players.'

'Will they talk to me?'

'I don't know. I expect so.'

'Will I be able to play chess with them?'

'I can't say. You'll have to ask them.'

I looked at Alice and she was sweetly smiling, as if she were laughing at me or as if everything in the world were as easy as looking for shrimps in a pool. I wanted to tell her that I thought I'd feel stupid going round Paris begging people to talk to me or play games with me, but I didn't. And then she took the hand that she was stroking and put it to her cheek and said: 'We'll watch over you. Of course we will.'

Before we left for Paris, my father, Hugh, had told me in confidence what his 'project' was. We were sitting on a cliff at the time, watching gulls circling in the air. Hugh said: 'Lewis, I'm going to build a hut in the garden.'

He said this as if he were old Brunel about to start on the Clifton Bridge. He seemed to want me to marvel.

I don't remember what I did say. Perhaps I just looked up at the birds, trying to think of something, and then Hugh went on: 'It's a secret between you and me, OK? I'm building it for Mum. We'll put a desk and a chair in it. It'll be a place where she can sit and read or work in the summer.'

I didn't look at him. If I had looked at him, I would have seen a short, neat man with gentle brown eyes and thick hair