

A Capacity for Love

A Story by William Page

Paris was deserted that afternoon, except for the soldiers. They stood with machine guns in front of the government buildings, and on the streets they were seen paroling in heavy boots with rifles slung over their shoulders. Susan, who was often frustrated by the traffic in the city, thought she was going to make it from the American hospital to her apartment without a single delay, but then two men in army fatigues stepped out in front of her Mercedes and stopped her on the Rue de Vaugiard. The soldier who checked her papers had short blond hair and blue-green eyes. He looked no more than eighteen, the age of Susan's daughter Cordelia. The other stood in front of the car with his rifle pointed down toward the pavement.

Susan was a tall woman with short dark hair and large hands and feet. Her nose and chin were strong and clearly defined. Her carriage and manner gave the impression of control, even dominance, but her eyes often betrayed her anxieties.

"You're an English Doctor?" the soldier asked her, as if physicians from London were a rare species of extinct bird.

"Yes," she said, and then added, "I was married to Frenchman, but he left me."

She was surprised that she had revealed Philippe's flight to a total stranger, especially since she had taken the trouble to hide it from most of her friends at the hospital, but then she remembered how Edward had laughed at her the first time he came to her apartment. "You'd make a miserable spy," he said. "Whenever you feel uncomfortable, you start talking about yourself."

The soldier didn't notice her embarrassment. He handed back her identification papers, smiled, and apologized for the inconvenience.

"I've lived in Paris for nineteen years," she said, "and I've never seen anything like this."

"Yes," the boy explained, "those attacked changed everything."

At her apartment on the Rues de Tournon, she thought about making herself dinner, but she couldn't bear the thought of eating alone again. She opened a bottle of wine instead. Her kitchen was tiny and was painted yellow—a color she disapproved of—and had a worn linoleum floor that depressed her, so she took the bottle and a glass and sat at Philippe's desk in the salon.

After drinking two glasses of wine, she decided to have a bath. She started the water running in the tub, and then went to her bedroom to undress and put on her robe. In the drawer where she kept her stockings she noticed that her jewelry box was not where it was supposed to be, so she picked it up and looked inside. It was empty. She didn't wear jewels often, but she had a set of pearls, three pairs of gold earrings, a gold necklace, and two cameo broaches. Everything was gone. She went to the tub, turned off the water, and telephoned Edward.

"It's me," she said. "I've been robbed."

“In the street?”
“No. Someone took my jewels from my bedroom.”
“Is anything else gone?”
“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”
“Do you want me come over?”
“If you could. I’d rather not be alone.”

She had met Edward at the American hospital, where he was patient. Another physician had poked his head into her examining room one afternoon and said, “I have an interesting case. A misshapen heart. Do you want to see the pictures?” So Susan saw the x-rays of his internal organs before she saw his face. The right ventricle was slightly enlarged. Her diagnosis was a condition called aortic stenosis and regurgitation, which was later confirmed. The patient came in after passing out momentarily in a taxi on his way home from work. His family had history of heart problems. There was nothing much they could do for him. If it became worse, he would have to have open-heart surgery, but they would avoid that as long as possible.

Susan became the consulting physician, and met him on the same day she saw the x-rays. He was a tall, slim man with beautiful hands. His face had a clean, precise air about it. None of his features were prominent: his eyes, nose, mouth, and chin were all in perfect proportion with each other, which gave him an odd, otherworldly look.

She was startled by her attraction. After they shook hands, she had the oddest feeling of intimacy with him. She wanted to reach out, touch his chest, and feel the heart she had seen in the X-rays.

That day she meant only to tell him that they wanted to do more tests, but he questioned her, and she, without meaning to, told him more than she should have. From his chart she learned that he worked at the American Embassy, but when she asked him what he did there, he told her that he wasn’t allowed to talk about it.

After her examination she was so befuddled and overwhelmed by her attraction that she told him about Philippe’s flight. He listened without commenting, stood, put his shirt and coat back on, and then asked her to have dinner with him.

While she waited, she lay in her bed under the blankets. When Philippe had left her, she imagined that she would read all the novels she had neglected because of her busy life. Her London books were stacked neatly in a case in her salon, and the new books she had ordered online were still in their packages sitting on Philippe’s desk. She hadn’t read a word. Being alone made her lazy and depressed. She seldom fixed herself a hot dinner if Cordelia was gone or if Edward wasn’t coming to see her. *I am being wasted*, she thought. *I have a large capacity for love and no one cares.*

When Edward rang the bell on the street, she jumped out of bed, let him in, and then stood without shoes on the stairs waiting for him to come up. It was a long climb for him, but he took it slowly, methodically, and looked calm, as he always did, when he reached the top.

“I hope it wasn’t too terrible of me to ask you to come,” she said.
“No. I was glad to get out.”

She offered herself to be kissed, but when he bent toward her, she pressed him against her body. She felt oddly masculine around him. After he kissed her, he said, “You must be cold. Shall we go in?”

She wasn’t cold or hadn’t noticed that she was.

Before he shut the door, he examined the heavy bolt lock. She didn't understand what he was doing, even when he said, "It doesn't seem to be tampered with. You do keep it locked, don't you?"

"When I'm not here, it's always locked."

"Then we can rule out a forced entry. Who else has a key?"

"Only my daughter."

"Did you ask her about the jewels?"

She laughed, "I had forgotten about them."

"How much are they worth?"

"I don't know. Maybe 2,000 Euros."

"Could you have misplaced them?"

"I don't think so. I have a box."

He took his coat off and hung it on the stand in the entryway. "You had better show me."

In the bedroom he sat on the unmade bed. The jewelry box was on top of the dresser. She carried it to the bed and handed it to him.

He examined it and remarked, "It doesn't have a lock."

"No."

"When was the last time you saw your jewels?"

It took her a moment to recall. "On Tuesday when we went out to dinner," she said, "I wore my gold earrings that night."

He handed her the box and said dryly, "That was six days ago."

"What do you think?"

"Does your husband have a key to this apartment?"

"No. We moved here after he left. Besides he would never do it. He has his own money."

"And your daughter?"

"I'm sure she would never steal from me."

"Perhaps, your love for her has made you blind to her needs."

"No, I'm sure you're wrong."

"Then," he said, "we have a mystery."

She replaced the box on the dresser and stood facing him.

"Your dress is wrinkled," he said.

"I guess it is."

He stood and walked to where she stood, kissed her neck, and unzipped the back of her dress. She allowed herself to be undressed and moved to the bed. He left her clothes lying on the floor where they fell, but when he took his shirt and trousers off, he folded them neatly and laid them on a chair.

Afterward she collected the blankets and the comforter from the floor. For a time she lay with her head resting on his chest. He didn't need to talk, but long silences always seemed forced to her. "I was stopped by soldiers today," she said.

"Where?"

"On the Rue de Vaugiard."

"What did they want?"

"They checked my papers."

"They're doing random checks. It's nothing to worry about. It's a show of strength.

Everybody knows it isn't likely to help find the terrorists, but the government has to do something. Otherwise they'll be perceived as weak. It's a political maneuver; it's not strategic."

“What do you think happened to my jewels?”

He sat up. “I didn’t want to be the one to tell you this, but your daughter is the only real suspect.”

“I’m sure you’re wrong.”

“Think about it. What does she ask for when she comes home?”

“Money.”

“So she has a need. That establishes motive. Then you yourself admit that she is the only other person with a key, and, being your daughter, she obviously knows when you’re out. That establishes opportunity.”

“But she would never steal from me.”

“I don’t want to argue with you. I’ve never met the girl. I hope I’m wrong.”

“I know you’re wrong,” she said, but she didn’t know.

“Where is she now?”

“She has a boyfriend, Luc. I only met him once, and I made the mistake of disapproving of him, so now she only comes home to sleep. He’s the son of a fashion designer and is six years older than Cordelia. He has no work, he doesn’t go to school, and, as far I as I can learn, has no plans to do anything.”

Since neither of them had the motivation to dress, they lay together in the warmth of the bed and the smell of their lovemaking. After a while she began to drift off into a fitful, dreaming sleep. She was reassured by the weight of his body next to hers. It was a pleasant respite from her day at work, which had been difficult, but her lull was abruptly interrupted by the sound of the front door slamming. She jumped out of bed and started looking around on the floor for her clothes.

“It’s Cordelia,” she said.

“Do you want me to sneak away?”

“Of course not. I want you to meet her.”

She carried the dress she had been wearing to the closet, dumped it in the hamper, and took a silk dressing robe from a hanger and put it on.

“I’ll go and explain,” she said at the door. “Dress and give me a few minutes and then come out and join us.”

She walked down the hall to the kitchen, threw the door open, and switched on the overhead light. Cordelia had been sitting in the dark facing the refrigerator. She jumped up and then sat back down. She was wearing black boots, a leather jacket, an old burgundy pullover, and a short black skirt.

“You scared me,” she said.

“Why were you sitting here in the dark? Are you hungry?”

“I thought I was, but now I don’t want anything.”

“I could cook something.”

“No. I’m okay.”

“Have you eaten dinner?”

“I don’t want anything.” Her voice was hard.

“Why don’t we go to the salon? I want to tell you something.”

She sighed loudly, but she followed her mother to the front room. At the door she stood and watched Susan turn on the lamps and adjust the electric heater near the window.

“Do you want to take off your coat? It’s warm enough, isn’t it?”

Cordelia removed her leather jacket, hung it on the stand in the hall, and returned to the doorway. Susan sat on the couch and patted the material on the cushion next to her, but Cordelia went to an armchair. Face to face with her, Susan saw that Cordelia's skin was pale and that she was perspiring. Her hair was dirty and oily and there were beads of sweat on her forehead. She stood, went to her, touched her forehead, and tried to take her pulse. Cordelia stood up. "I'm okay," she said.

"No, you're not. You have a fever."

"It's nothing."

"I'm the doctor here. I'll decide if it's nothing. Why are you afraid of me?"

"I don't want you to touch me."

"I've always touched you before. How long have you been like this?"

She folded her arms over her chest and screamed: "Can't you just leave me alone!"

Edward came from the bedroom at the moment. He was completely dressed. Cordelia looked at him as if he were a ghost. She backed away from him until she bumped into the desk.

"There's someone I'd like you to meet," Susan said. "This is Edward. We're in love."

Cordelia laughed. The inappropriateness of her reaction confused Susan. She said, "Why don't we all sit down?"

Cordelia retreated back to the armchair, and Edward sat next to Susan on the couch. A long silence ensued. Eventually it occurred to Susan that the other two were expecting her to pick up the conversation, but all she couldn't think of to say was, "Why don't you stay and have dinner with us."

"I'm not hungry."

"Maybe you'd feel better if you had something to eat."

"I'm okay."

"You don't look okay. You're pale and you have a fever. Do you want me to get you some aspirin?"

"I want you to leave me alone."

"You're acting like a five-year-old. You're sick and you should let me treat you."

"It's my body!" she yelled. "I can do what I want with it."

Susan didn't understand why she was so aggressive. She was about to question her about her hostility, when Edward placed his hand on her arm to stop her.

"Cordelia," he said. "Tell us about the drugs you've been taking."

"I don't have to tell you anything!" she screamed. "You're not my father!" She stood and started for the door. Susan stopped her. She grabbed her arm and held her. Cordelia fought her. She hit her in the face with her free hand and was about to hit her again when Edward grabbed her other arm.

"Tell me the truth," Susan said.

"I'm not doing anything! I'm just sick." She struggled as she yelled at them.

Edward pulled the sleeve of Cordelia's sweater up. "Look at her arm," he said to Susan.

He held her bare arm up to the lamplight so that Susan could see the tiny red needle marks on her forearm. Susan let Cordelia go. Edward did the same. She had stopped struggling. The three of them stood in double doorway between the salon and the entryway.

"How long," Susan demanded.

"What difference does it make?"

"Is it heroin?"

"Yes."

"And you took the jewels from my box?"

“We sold them.”

“It’s him, isn’t it? He made you do it.”

“You don’t understand anything” she said. “He didn’t make me. I wanted to.”

“I’m going to take you to the hospital.”

“If you love me, you’ll give me money and let me go.”

“So that you can buy more drugs?”

“They’ll kill him if I don’t bring something.”

“I don’t care what they do to him. Look what he’s done to you.”

“If you let him die,” she shouted, “I’ll never speak to you again!”

“I’m not doing anything to him. He’s brought this on himself.”

“It just shows that you don’t love me.”

“What?” Susan demanded. “Because I won’t let you kill yourself?”

“I’d rather die with him, than stay here with you.” She started for the door.

Susan grabbed her arm, but Cordelia screamed at her: “Let me go! I hate you! All you care about is yourself. I hate you!”

What Susan saw in her eyes wasn’t hate; it was fear. Cordelia was desperate and backed into a corner. She needed space so Susan gave way and let go of her arm. Like a caged animal Cordelia saw her moment. She grabbed her jacket, ran to the door, opened it, and slipped outside. They could hear her heavy boots on the stairs as she made her way down to the street.

From the window they watched her push open the courtyard door. She went in the direction of the Odeon, the nearest Metro station. The black lamps were lit, and parked cars lined the streets, but no one was in sight except Cordelia. After she disappeared around the corner, Susan said, “They wouldn’t really kill him, would they?”

“They might,” he said. “It happens all the time.”

“Then we have to do something.”

“It’s a bit late for that now.”

“We could call the police.”

“And tell them what? Do you want to incriminate your daughter?”

“But we can’t just sit around and do nothing. I’m going to call her.” She went to the bedroom to get her phone, which was in her purse, but when she called the number, it went directly to voicemail. She left a message: “Call me. I want to help.”

In the salon Edward was sitting on the couch. She told him, “Her phone was off. I left her a message.”

They drank wine and ate goat cheese with bread while they waited for Cordelia to call back.

Edward was convinced that she would call, but Susan wasn’t so certain. She paced up and down in front of the desk

“Just relax,” Edward said. “She’ll call.”

She called at ten, forty minutes after she had stormed out of the apartment.

“Mamma? It’s me,” she said. She was crying.

“Where are you?”

“You have to help us. I love him.”

“I will, if you give me a chance.”

“You have to bring money.”

“How much?”

“As much as you can. If they have something, it will give us time.”

“I’ll bring everything I have. Tell me where to meet you.”

“Take the Metro to the Serves Babylone. That’s the change. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I love you.”

Cordelia waited on the line for a moment, said, “Please hurry,” and then hung up.

They pooled what money they had, keeping back only fifty Euros; it came to just over seven hundred. Edward thought it would be sufficient. He counted it a second time and put in an envelope while Susan dressed.

“What do you want to do?” he asked, when she was ready. “Are you going to give her the money and let her go?”

“Oh no. I want to give it to him. If she wants him to have it, she has to come with me to hospital.”

“Do you want me to get a pistol?”

“Do you own one?”

“I know where to get one.”

“No,” she said, with resolve. “No guns.”

Outside there were flakes of snow falling. It was just enough to make the streets wet. They walked down Rues de Tournon toward the Odeon. Most of the windows in the apartment buildings were dark. The sky was grey but was tinged with yellow from the light of the city. A driver was sitting in a taxi double-parked with his motor running. His car was blocking the street in one direction, but there was no traffic. At the corner in front of a flower store, two soldiers stood leaning on their rifles. They looked bored. Susan averted their gaze, but Edward smiled at them and they nodded as he passed.

The Metro station was brightly lit. Edward bought a packet of ten tickets for the trains, and they went down to the platform, where there were more soldiers. One was looking at the papers of a young man, who was wearing jeans and a leather jacket. The other paced back and forth in front of the movie advertisements on the other side. Susan and Edward didn’t bother to sit. The train was coming.

The air inside the carriage was warm and smelled of stale perfume and candy. There were only three other people with them in the car, and they were all around Cordelia’s age. They were sitting together and seemed somber and tired.

Edward led her to a seat in the corner of the compartment and let her sit first near the window. After he sat, he said, “I’ll keep the cash,” he said. “I’ll follow your lead, but I don’t want you to handle the money.”

“I don’t want her to slip away again.”

“Can we take her to the hospital tonight?”

“Yes. As soon as this business is finished, we’ll get a taxi. I’ll admit her myself.”

Serves Babylone was the second stop, and they were there in less than five minutes.

Cordelia was waiting on the platform. She looked cold in her short dress. Her lips were pale blue. She walked slowly toward them and started to say something, but her words were lost in the sound of the loud horn that blew before the carriage doors shut. They stood facing each other until the train pulled into the tunnel. Cordelia was the first to speak: “Just give me the money and go back.”

“No. We’re coming with you.”

“You can’t.”

“If you want me to help him, then you have to agree to come to the hospital tonight.”

“Mamma, you promised.”

“I didn’t promise anything.”

She stood trying to decide. Two soldiers suddenly appeared at the end of the platform and strolled leisurely toward them.

“Let’s walk,” Edward said. “We’re going to attract attention.”

They each took one of Cordelia’s arms and walked her toward the exit. On the stairs she said, “No. We have to go to the other line,” so they turned around, went back down, and walked through a maze of tunnels to another platform, which was empty.

On the train they had a compartment to themselves, and Cordelia pleaded with her mother to give her the money.

“You can’t go with me,” she said, “they’ll kill you.”

“Your friends do a lot of killing.”

“They’ll think you’re from the police.”

“I doubt that.”

“Please, Mamma.”

“If it’s not safe, then we’ll take you to the hospital. We’re only going to give him the money. If you don’t want to see him, we can get out at the next stop and find a taxi.”

“Please.”

“You asked for my help. It’s my money, and I’ll buy what I want with it.”

“I’ll pay you back.”

They pulled into a station and a man stepped into the compartment with them. Cordelia stared at him mournfully and then sat looking out the window. At the Abbesses station, she stood. “This is it,” she said. After the doors opened, she said to Susan, “You won’t like it.”

“I already don’t like it.”

There were only a few people on the street: a group of soldiers, a few men in heavy coats, and two women dressed in black talking in front of an aluminum grating. The snow was still coming down, but there was no accumulation. The concrete was wet and reflected the bright lights around the station. They crossed over a bridge and walked toward the Cimetiere de Montmartre. Near the entrance to the cemetery they turned off the main road and started down a side street. At the end of the street there was a dilapidated building with a red neon sign in the first floor window that said *Hotel*. They went in.

In the lobby a young woman sat behind a desk staring at her phone. She looked up when they came in, but when she saw Cordelia she went back to her phone. They went up a wooden staircase to the second floor. The steps creaked, and the corridor smelled of urine. The wallpaper in the halls was dirty and torn. Some cheap, yellowed prints of Paris hung on the walls.

Cordelia knocked on a door with a metal 5 nailed to it. The door was locked from the inside. Luc opened it. When he saw Susan, he said, “Oh God.”

He let them in. The room was big, but the only furniture was a bed, a washstand, and wardrobe closet. The carpet was an ugly brown color and threadbare, and the wallpaper was the same as the hallway. A young man stood in the corner. He looked younger than Luc, and he seemed afraid when he saw Susan and Edward. Luc said, in French, “Don’t worry, it’s her mother.”

The young man smiled. He was better dressed than Luc. He wore an American style jacket, cut off at the waist. Underneath the coat, he wore a white shirt, buttoned to the top, jeans, and cowboy boots. He was smoking a cigarette, but that only made him look as if he were trying to appear older than he was. He had fine features, and wore his hair combed back, again in a style that was distinctly American. Susan looked at the boy with curiosity. Was he the one who was threatening to kill her daughter?

“I hope we have some money,” Luc said.

Edward said. “I have it.”

Cordelia added, as a kind of apology, “They wouldn’t give it me.”

“I’m taking my daughter to a hospital tonight,” Susan said. “We only came because she insisted that you were in danger. You don’t look threatened to me. Are you?”

Luc shrugged his shoulders. His eyes were empty and restless. He turned toward the boy and then toward where Edward and Susan stood. “We didn’t want involve you,” he said, “but we were desperate for money.”

“You can’t involve Cordelia without involving me.”

He shrugged his shoulders again.

“If I give you what money I have, will you promise never to see my daughter again?”

Cordelia yelled, “Mamma!”

Luc waited for a moment and then said without interest, “It’s her life.”

Cordelia said, “Mamma I love him.” She pulled at Susan’s arm like a child.

Susan said to Luc, “I want you to stay away from my daughter.”

“And if I give my word?” he said pathetically. “Would you believe it?”

“I’m a doctor,” she said. “If you give her drugs again, I’ll have her committed and you reported.”

“Mamma please, just give us the money and go. You can’t do any good here. Please.”

Luc looked away. Susan saw that he didn’t want to be bothered, so she pressed him, “Do you agree?”

“And if I do?”

“We’ll give you the money.”

“How much?”

“About seven hundred Euros.”

Careful to avoid Cordelia’s gaze, he said, “I don’t see that I have much choice.”

“I didn’t mean to give you a choice.”

Cordelia yelled, “It’s my choice! I’m the one who decides!”

Susan ignored her. She had her eyes fixed on Luc. “Then you agree?”

“Yes.”

“No!” Cordelia screamed. “You can’t agree! It’s my decision!” She ran at Luc and grabbed him. Then she started crying and knelt at his feet, holding onto his legs. “Please,” she cried, “Please, don’t do it.”

Luc looked embarrassed and bothered. He pushed her away, and she lay on the carpet, crying. Edward and Susan came forward and helped her stand. She struggled to regain her composure and then said, defiantly, like a child, “I won’t go. I won’t go.” But she had no strength or resolve. Susan held her around the waist and led her to the door. Edward took the envelope from his pocket and threw it on the bed. “Do you want to count it?”

“No,” Luc said, “It’s not necessary.”

The young man hadn’t moved from the where stood in the corner. He had continued to smoke. He had observed the other four as if he were watching a film, smiling now and again at the excesses of the scene. Susan couldn’t decide about him. There was something about his manner that disturbed her, but she couldn’t take him seriously. To her he was just a boy.

In the hallway Cordelia started to cry. “It isn’t fair,” she said. “It isn’t fair.”

Susan tried to soothe her. “I’m sorry. I had to show you that he doesn’t care about you.”

“He does care. You don’t know what it’s like.”

They led her down the corridor, but at the stairs, she suddenly began to hit Edward in the face and chest with her fists. When Susan got between them and grab her wrists, she collapsed again. Susan held her around the waist, and spoke to Edward: "Did she hurt you?"

"No."

She had split his lip. He took a handkerchief from his coat pocket, dabbed the corner of his mouth, and then stared at the red blood on the white cloth. His face was pale.

"Do you have chest pains?"

"Little ones when I breathe," he said. "It's not bad."

Cordelia didn't understand what was going on. She was crying again. Susan held her with one hand and took Edward around the waist with the other. They both walked with her down the stairs to the lobby. The girl they had seen earlier was gone. Susan thought about calling an ambulance. But when she stopped in the reception, Edward pulled at her arm and took charge. He led them through the door.

The snow was still coming down. By this time there was a little accumulation in the streets. The hotel light had been turned off. They walked slowly until they reached the bridge. Once they were across the bridge Susan could see the lights from the Metro station. A taxi was standing outside waiting for a fair. She held onto the two people she loved most and steered them toward the taxi. Her heart was bursting. As she guided them through the falling snow, she felt only the enormous capacity of her love.