

LBRIS

We know
books

A Blow to the Heart

MARCEL THEROUX



faber and faber

One

Daisy Polidoro was seven when she saw her first boxing match. The television set was an old black and white one that her father sometimes thumped to improve the reception. He was a gentle man: his way with mutinous appliances the only hint of violence in their orderly world. The interest in boxing was not foreshadowed by anything in his character. Daisy saw a squared ring crackling between bursts of static, a beaten fighter, head sagging in defeat. It was no more than a glimpse. Daisy's father spied her at the door in her nightie and dispatched her quickly back to bed. It would be twenty-five years before she saw another.

Her father died a year later. That image – him twiddling the recalcitrant aerial, the picture fizzing with electric snow – was one of a handful that sustained his memory into her adult life. Some others: the smell of his Irish stew; creosoting the shed; dragging Daisy unwillingly round garden centres on Sunday afternoons; her hugging him after he came down from the loft and her shock at the vicious prickle of fibreglass insulation in his jumper; the vertiginous swoop when he lifted her up to carry her on his shoulders.

Nothing had prepared her for his death. Loss is a stranger sometimes to the only child. Even games of ludo had been weighted miraculously in her favour. 'She doesn't like losing.' Who did?

Daisy took it well, they said; her mother less so. She never remarried. Daisy grew up bright, precociously adult, a little closed. Her sharp tongue intimidated potential suitors. She

thought her glasses were the problem.

Someone once told Daisy she was too beautiful for public transport. She didn't believe it. She didn't have that kind of face or body. But on any given day she could be beautiful enough to feel a curious alteration in men's attitudes to her: the unfocused attentiveness and clumsy passes that are the hazard and birthright of the beautiful.

Daisy was thirteen at the time of her first encounter with the hereditary privileges of the very beautiful. On a French exchange in Toulouse she shared a room with Lindsey, a statuesque and prematurely buxom blonde girl who made a big impression on the host family. '*Daisy est jolie*,' Madame Boissoneault cooed over the breakfast table, '*mais Lindsey est belle*.'

Lindsey looked uncomprehendingly at Daisy.

'She said I'm pretty, but you're beautiful,' Daisy explained. She resented the observation, but not as much as she resented having to translate it for Lindsey, whose French was rudimentary.

Lindsey brightened. 'Oh, I think you're beautiful too, Daisy.'

'It's not my opinion. I'm just translating,' said Daisy.

'*Merci*,' said Lindsey. '*Mais, Daisy avoir* . . . How do you say "lovely skin", Daze?'

It was strange how good looks conferred a special status on Lindsey: dim, lazy Lindsey, who missed home, couldn't speak French, and pretended to be ill in order to avoid Madame B's garlicky cooking. The prerogatives of her beauty even survived Madame B's discovering her in her room, stuffing her face with a tin of spaghetti hoops that she had bought on a secret and uncharacteristically resourceful trip to the hypermarket.

Life is unfair, Daisy wrote precociously in her journal. She knew already that contrary to everything that adults implied, people didn't start, compete, or finish equal. God had given some his equivalent of a trust fund: a big bust, blonde hair and a retroussé nose. And how was it possible to worship the beautiful without diminishing the plain? Everyone, surely, was enti-

tled to feel beautiful. And in her life, Daisy did feel beautiful at times – though not at those times around Christmas when drunk men in suits approached her on the Underground with inane chat-up lines, of which 'you're too beautiful to travel by public transport' was the most memorable.

Daisy Polidoro was thirty-two; when she thought of feeling beautiful, she thought of her husband Stuart twisting her hair into a thick, soft rope, or marvelling at the lightness of her step as she moved noiselessly over the creaky wooden floorboards of their bedroom, or praising her figure.

'My dad said small breasts are the secret of a long and happy marriage,' he said once, cupping hers in his hands as she sat brushing her hair before the mirror.

'He's right,' said Daisy. 'I wouldn't fancy you with big ones.'

Stuart chuckled and rubbed his nose against her neck. ' . . . because they stay beautiful for ever.'

'But wasn't it your dad who said that if you get the chance to sleep with a woman you should always take it? And always to try and pick up waitresses?'

'He's a red-blooded Sardinian male,' said Stuart, 'and a product of his upbringing, but he was right about the breasts.'

Daisy and Stuart met at university. She noticed him in Freshers' Week at a party in their hall of residence. Stuart struck her as the only grown-up. She loved his good-humoured calm, his intelligence and sobriety. He was big, virile, serious, balding like a young Brando, with an equine combination of strength and tenderness.

Stuart was studying medicine and wanted to be a psychiatrist, he said. That struck Daisy as the only false note about him. After knowing him for twenty minutes, Daisy felt it was a bad choice: he was too sane, too open. All health, no darkness; how could he understand the blighted inner worlds of his future patients? So Daisy was pleased when Stuart changed his mind and decided to specialize in haematology.

They married very young for their time and class, at twenty-four, but delayed having children while they each secured a

foothold in their respective careers. Daisy had trained as a journalist and was doing casual shifts at a national newspaper, where her fluency and humour were impressing her superiors. After a while, she got a rolling one-year contract to work for the political desk at a salary that struck both her and Stuart as astronomical.

After several years of marriage, she continued to be surprised by the varieties of happiness in her life. At the office party one Christmas, Stuart arrived late and stood uncomfortably in the corner with his coat over his arm, and an orange juice, waiting for her to finish her conversation with the editor. Daisy knew he was impatient to leave, but still she lingered, so proud of him, wanting to show him off, conscious of his love in the room like a private sun which shone only for her.

They never argued about it, but she knew it irked Stuart that she used her maiden name on her byline. 'My family think it's weird,' was all that Stuart would say. She found it hard to explain to him why she chose not to use her married name: 'Daisy Adams', the name she had borne through school and university and journalism school, seemed to keep faith with a younger self whose ambitions she was finally beginning to fulfil.

That was the only source of friction – that, and the pressure to have children that she knew Stuart was under from his family. Stuart shielded her from it on the whole, but his parents dropped not-so-subtle hints whenever they went round to visit, especially if Stuart's prolific younger sisters (two children each and counting) were there. And then, three months after her thirtieth birthday, Daisy got pregnant. She hadn't really intended to, but they had grown less and less vigilant about birth control in a way that did seem to be tempting fate.

Daisy took the pregnancy test in her lunch-hour and walked around the block for ten minutes with the indicator in her bag. When she looked at it in the privacy of a toilet cubicle, she was taken aback at the unambiguousness of the blue line that marked the threshold of this new world.

There were practical obstacles: the timing ruled her out of covering the party conferences; they had a garden but no spare room; she wondered how they would manage on just Stuart's salary. But when she got home that evening, Stuart was cooking and she felt so full of love for him, and so excited by the extraordinary effect her news would have on him, that it spilled out of her with none of the coy preamble she had been rehearsing on the tube. Stuart wanted to call his parents immediately.

'We have to wait twelve weeks, Dr Polidoro,' said Daisy.

Stuart scrunched up his face with the imagined effort of bottling up the news. 'What if someone asks? You know I can't tell a lie.'

Daisy pinched him. 'Why would anyone ask, unless big-mouth was dropping hints?'

Stuart, who was protective at the best of times, started to behave as though Daisy was the sole and haemophilic heir of an important dynasty. If he could have carried her around on a cushion like a rare and fragile egg, he would have. He sent her flowers at work – but mainly, she knew, so they would absorb radiation from her computer screen; he urged folic acid supplements on her, scrutinized potatoes for eyes, vetoed sushi because of worries about mercury levels, and kept her out of smoky rooms. Most astonishingly, he stuck to his word not to tell anyone. Daisy knew what this cost him. His open nature was not designed to keep secrets.

Finally, they were ready. They decided to make the formal announcement at Stuart's parents' house over Sunday dinner. It was the ninth of January. The anticipation of the inevitable scenes of melodrama (Mrs Polidoro in tears; Mr Polidoro probably in tears as well; endless advice and anecdotes – and no chance of a drink to make the time go faster) gave Daisy a reprise of her morning sickness and she stayed in bed. 'I'll get up in a minute,' she said half-heartedly. Stuart pulled on a polo-neck sweater. 'What's the hurry?' he said and went to get the papers.

He was gone so long that she made herself a forbidden cup of coffee and was drinking it in the kitchen when the front door bell rang. Stuart had forgotten his keys. Daisy briefly considered dumping the coffee in the sink, but she decided to brazen it out and went to the door with the cup in her hand. She liked the rituals of loving chastisement which were part of his protective nature, and anticipated another, a telling-off so tender it would resemble a caress: 'Coffee? At least tell me it was decaf', and, shaking his head, Stuart would push past her with the papers: 'Well, at least I hope you made me one too.'

Daisy pulled the door open.

'Mrs Polidoro? May I come in? I'm afraid I have some bad news. Would you like to sit down? There's been an accident. Your husband was badly hurt. He was taken by ambulance to hospital, but the doctors were unable to do anything for him.'

The ground lurched. 'There must be a mistake. He just went out to buy the papers.'

'We've identified the body.'

'The body?' Daisy felt an immense emptiness, the sensation of a coin dropping into a bottomless well. Something heavy seemed to clang shut inside her. 'I want to see him.'

The police officers accompanied Daisy to the morgue. They pulled back the sheet. Stuart smelled of the soap with the plastic goldfish inside that his nieces had given them for Christmas: sweet and rainwater-fresh. He seemed unmarked. Daisy searched his big sculpted body for the fatal injury and could see only a small round hole to the side of his left nipple, as though a tiny bead had entered his chest.

'That killed him?'

'Instantly.'

In the week after Stuart's death, Daisy lost her baby. She was glad she had told no one. She burned the pictures from the twelve week scan in the fireplace along with the indicator she had saved from the pregnancy test. As she watched the flames blister the chemicals in the images, it seemed to her that a natural law which kept the quantity of happiness constant over

time was asserting itself, and she was now paying for all those years of unconscious contentment with her husband.

Daisy spent the whole funeral feeling overwhelmed by Stuart's huge and boisterously grieving family. Daisy's own mother tried to be supportive, but Daisy protected her, as she had always done, from the depth of her sadness, conscious that her fragile, overburdened, anxious mother would sink under the weight of Daisy's grief. So Daisy bore it alone.

She went with her mother-in-law to every day of the trial of Stuart's killer. He was seventeen years old, skinny, and pale as a seagull. He wore a tracksuit and trainers to court and was accompanied by someone from Social Services.

In his testimony he described how, on the day of Stuart's death, he had been drinking and taking amphetamines. Walking down the street that morning, he had been vandalizing cars when Stuart confronted him. Faced with a larger, angry man – Stuart, the defence counsel reminded the jury, was six foot three and had played rugby for his university team – the boy panicked and stabbed at Stuart with the Phillips head screwdriver he had been using to scrape paint off vehicles.

Stabbed *at* him: the defence barrister was careful to draw attention to the preposition. 'Was it your intention to inflict an injury on Mr Polidoro?'

'No. I was afraid he was going to do something to me.'

Drugged up, jumpy, surprised in the act of committing a mindless but minor offence, menaced by the terrifying bulk of Stuart Polidoro, the barrister implied, who wouldn't behave as young Joel Heath had behaved?

Daisy resented Stuart's demotion from 'Dr' to 'Mr'. It was his job to be calm in a crisis. She thought: *Stuart angry?* He was a pillar of cool self-assurance. He would have confronted the boy with gentle authority, asked him what he was doing, why was he doing it? Whose anger was the boy blinded by? Not Stuart's.

Heath's mother came to court for the verdict. She was not

much older than Daisy; not unattractive either, but weary-looking, pinched and pale. With her was a girl of about six, Heath's sister, who carried felt-tips in a pink plastic handbag. As they waited in the corridor, Heath's mother bent her head to supervise her daughter's colouring, and stopped her own bronchitic cough with her fist.

Daisy concentrated on remaining poised, but she wanted to scream at the boy's mother: this thing you call your *life*, a broken sewage pipe spilling into other people's lives.

Mrs Polidoro was more confrontational. 'Scum,' she muttered audibly.

'What did you say?' screamed Heath's mother, in a voice that was surprisingly deep and raw for her slight frame. She made as though to fly at them, but was easily restrained by the ushers.

Joel Heath was found guilty only of manslaughter. He received a two-year sentence in a young offenders' institution and was ordered to attend a drug treatment programme.

For a while, Daisy kept in touch with Stuart's family, but their meetings were too unsettling. Her presence in their house was in fact unwelcome, an image of Stuart's murder; and she and the elder Mrs Polidoro, who had at first consoled one another, were like a pair of mirrors, reflecting each other's grief in an infinite arc, until they were forced to turn away from each other.

Two

After the trial, Daisy sold the home she had shared with Stuart and moved to a smaller flat in another part of the city. She bought the first property she looked at. The move generated an unintended windfall of money: never had she wanted so little, yet never had she been so well-off.

Her new flat was sparsely furnished. Daisy gave away or sold many of their joint possessions. Things that were too precious to give up she stacked in boxes in the tiny cloakroom that the estate agent had euphemistically called the study-bedroom. Then Daisy took a sabbatical from her work, and went away to Sri Lanka for a month.

It was the low season and the hotel she stayed in was empty except for a young German man who was also travelling on his own. She could feel his glance on her at mealtimes. One evening, fortified by beer, he plucked up courage to sit with her. He had just come from Goa. He had a design consultancy in Munich. She guessed he was twenty-six. She let him buy her a drink, but when he put his hand on her knee, her body tensed. 'I'm a widow,' she said. She felt him shrink from her.

The next day, in the afternoon, she borrowed one of the rickety hotel bicycles. Five minutes away from the hotel, the road snaked through rice fields. Men were working in the heat, barebacked, making bricks by hand. Beyond the fields, wild elephants ambled at the fringes of the forest. *I am a widow*, she thought, but the heat and the strange surroundings seemed to have erased her pain and her sense of self. There was hope here, in spite of the friends who had advised her not

to come away alone. Living in an unthinking present in an unfamiliar place, eating, sleeping, swimming in the pool – the hotel manager warned her about the seasonal rip tides that made the beach too hazardous for swimming – Daisy began to feel that some kind of life without her husband was recoverable.

But when Daisy returned home, she discovered that she had simply left the feeling part of herself behind, and that her grief and pain were waiting for her, concealed like loose change in a thousand odd receptacles: the sympathetic smile of a colleague who had covered Heath's trial, or the sound of a baby crying, or the rare cards she got from Mrs Polidoro.

Daisy found that she could no longer do her job. To write even the kind of articles she had been writing, she had to reach into herself, inhabit her soul a little, but she found it too painful. Whatever she was writing, she dredged up memories of her dead husband and child; her ambition, which had preceded even her love for Stuart, vanished; and the blistering image she had burned in the hearth of her old flat haunted her like an emblem of lost hope. She quit and took a job at her local library. It was less than half a mile from her flat, a purpose-built Edwardian building with books spread over two floors – reference section in the basement – and a separate children's library housed in another building. By the issues desk were shelves of videos and CDs, like an anxious assertion of relevance, but the bulk of the borrowers wanted romantic novels, books on learning English, or simply to study at the desks in the reference library.

Now Daisy walked to work, she stamped and stacked books, she walked home and ate and went to bed. A year passed.

How did she cope? Barely. Sundays were the worst.

It made perfect sense to Daisy, an agnostic, that Christians worshipped on a Sunday: Sunday was the day that everyone needed God. Sunday was a tyrant, a psychopath who could be bribed to sweetness for an hour or two by a trip to a gallery, or

lunch with a friend, or a walk, but when it got you alone after seven p.m. its expression changed, turned cold and hard, and it told you to wipe the smile off your face: it's too late, you're too old, too lost, to start again.

One of Daisy's friends told her about their cure for Sunday: the Valley Hall steam baths. On a Sunday evening, she said, the intense heat of the hot rooms and the freezing water of the plunge pool seemed to turn the blood in your legs to marble and purge the worst of your gloom.

Daisy disagreed. She'd been there with Stuart and couldn't bear them any more. The ghostly shapes in the steam-room were a too-literal afterlife, and the shabbiness and smoking and smells of fried food in the changing area, while tolerable with Stuart, were too close in texture to the hopeless melancholy that nibbled at the circumference of her reduced existence. She missed Stuart all the time, but she missed him most on Sundays.

It was March again. London bathed beneath an unseasonal Tuscan sun: the city gilded, its sky turquoise. The big supermarket by the canal was empty. Daisy shopped there every Friday in her lunch-hour. She was examining a shopping list she'd found in a trolley in the car park.

On a scrap of torn exercise book, a woman's hand had written in blue biro: *tampax, cauliflower, teabags, lemons, jif, things for kids lunches*. Since Stuart's death, Daisy had acquired an odd tic: whenever she found a shopping list, she used it. Over a six-month period, this strange rule had disclosed an unexpected taste for silverskin onions and cockles; confirmed her hatred of melons, brown sauce and tinned steak-and-kidney pudding; and revealed a predictable dislike of nicotine chewing gum which, as a non-smoker, she had no incentive to try and enjoy.

The random items on this list gave a glimpse of someone else's life: the life of a busy and organized mother with school-age children. Its brevity implied a kitchen replete with the