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**Opening Extract from...**

# We Had it So Good

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# WE HAD IT SO GOOD

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virago

# Sunshine

Aged nine, Stephen standing outside the fur-storage depot where his father works, his sturdy legs in shorts planted on Californian ground. Feet wide apart, shoulders up, arms behind his back, his neck sticking out from the collar of a checked shirt to which a narrow bow-tie has been clipped, and his round Charlie Brown head dusted with the dark shadow of a crew-cut. All-American boy.

'That day,' he told his children, 'was the most exciting day of my life. That's when I put on Marilyn Monroe's fur stole. And got thumped on the head by my old man when he saw what I was doing.'

The cold-storage warehouse took care of the fur coats of the movie stars. Stephen struggled to express memories he could find no words for, of walking along the lines of minks and sables, ocelots and ermines, allowed to carefully stroke their satin pelts, insert his own small arm into their dangling sleeves and feel the silken linings. His scrubbed hand was permitted briefly to enter the great surprise of a velvet pocket.

'This coat belongs to Miss Bacall,' his father told him, in his

immigrant accent, 'this one to Miss Hayworth. The animal was a living thing, a beautiful creature that once was. And only a beautiful woman deserves to wear a coat like this.'

If Marianne and her brother Max, even as children, cynically thought the world of their forefathers was unreal, made up by their father as a bedtime story, Stephen in his time had been far more credulous. For years he had believed that his father was on actual speaking terms with film stars, that he went to work every day with Deborah Kerr and Audrey Hepburn and Ava Gardner. Only after he made the momentous first visit to the cold-storage company, driving home with his father through Los Angeles suburbs, did he learn that the actresses never called to pick up or deposit their own furs: they had assistants to bring in the coats, the heat of the stars' bodies still trapped in the linings, redolent of their sweat and perfume, the Joy, the No. 5, L'Heure Bleu.

The brutal heavy-set warehousemen regarded the coats as skin, animal pelts, weighty objects to be moved about in freezing conditions. They were all short, tough types, with large forearms and thinning hair. It was a shock, after the feminine world of home, his mother, his two sisters – their hairspray hanging in the air long after they had stood up from the mirror, and face powder leaving scented trails scattered through the house; motes of lily-of-the-valley and lilac whitened the rugs.

Inside the warehouse Stephen listened to his father's explanations about why a fur needed to be kept under special conditions. The cool air and the darkness stopped the skins drying out, the hairs discolouring and held back the infestation of insects, which could eat away at the garment. The duties of the employees included not just hanging the coats but ensuring that they were not too close together, to prevent crushing. There was regular spraying of the unit with strong chemicals to control pests and rodents. Under no circumstances was a fur to be stored in a plastic bag, which could build up humidity and mould. The

sight of a plastic bag in a cold-storage facility was the way, he said, you could detect an outfit run by a crook.

After the lecture, Stephen ran down the racks of furs which hung like heavy headless bodies in the darkness. Doubling back, he came to a rail of stoles that had just arrived for treatment and storage. His father was on the other side of the room smoking the stump of a cigar, his knee raised, his foot resting on a wooden crate, a small, skinny man – with the endurance, his wife said, of an ox – who arrived in America all by himself aged twelve and who barely grew afterwards, as if the soil of home in Europe had given him all the nutrients he needed. She was a head taller than him in her nylons, and her hair rose even higher, blue-black and held up with a butterfly comb.

The garment that lay draped around the hanger was slipping off, and before it reached the floor Stephen raised his arms to catch it. The fur body fell, weirdly, he thought, both heavy and light, and with a fragrance of hot pearls. The hairs brushed his face and tickled him. 'I had to try that thing on,' he told his children. 'I don't know what came over me, but you know all kids love fancy dress and maybe it was just Hallowe'en come early.'

The weight of the pale mink bore down on his thin arms. He came walking out towards a mirror so he could see what kind of being he had been transformed into.

His father turned and saw his only son draped and twirling on his toes in Marilyn Monroe's champagne-mink stole. Stephen thought he was taking the opportunity to try out transformation. He was exercising his birthright, the American capacity to be reborn.

A hard whack came from behind and he heard his father utter imprecations in his native language, in which there were few vowels and many syllables that seemed to get stuck in the speaker's throat, choking him.

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At home, he was a momma's boy. He watched his mother take a series of unconnected items from various storage places in the kitchen and, by magic, turn flour, sugar, water, butter into a cake, which contained elements of all of them but, through an alchemical process, now resembled something completely different. He would climb onto a high stool and explore inside the recesses of the cupboards, finding bitter black baking chocolate, boxes of dry graham crackers, tiny glass bottles of vanilla essence. Alone, all these things were disgusting; in his mother's marvellous hands, bound together by strong voodoo, they turned into delicious treats. His older sisters did not care for desserts. They wore too much makeup and were rumoured to lead a wild life on the periphery of the neighbourhood.

In the kitchen Stephen failed to develop an interest in baking, as his father had feared – now the butt of daily jokes about his sissy boy, the *feygele*. Instead, baking had ignited a curiosity about the inner mysteries of the ingredients themselves, their hidden lives. One night Stephen's father brought home a child's chemistry set for him. Working late in his bedroom (the only member of his family not to have to share a room, the privileged little prince), he completed every experiment by two a.m., and awoke the next morning parched for more knowledge. At school he learned about chemical compounds and molecules. The very air you breathed consisted of oxygen, and when you combined it with a couple of measures of hydrogen, it was water. Things changed their forms because of events invisible to the naked eye, as if God was in the kitchen, with his crazy wooden spoon. The universe was spinning and expanding; great gaseous clouds were worlds. Years later he would be moved to sudden tears, sitting in the college library, by the beauty of physics, which was not even his major. He sensed the divine. God was in the sub-particle.

Observing his son propel his way through high school, like one of the rockets that the space programme was shooting up in the

direction of the moon, with the best grades in chemistry, biology, physics and math, his father wondered from which side of the family the brains had come. He had had a grandfather back home who, by all accounts, had been a learned man, a bearded wonder, but he only remembered his herring breath. His wife was singular for her beauty, not her thoughts. Where did this amazing mind come from?

Yet he distrusted intellectuals. Si Newman still thought like a manual worker, moved by the herd mentality of the crowd. His son could not hammer a nail straight, or take apart and put back together a small appliance. He was skinny like his father, taller but weak, without the upper-body strength that the old man believed was crucial for personal survival. What maketh a man? Biceps, triceps and pectoral muscles. He didn't know, or could never remember, these doctors' terms but he felt them under his flaking skin. Strong quads were also helpful. Furs could weigh as much as lumber. Sealskin: that was a very heavy pelt, thankfully now out of fashion.

He badly wanted to have a son with a college education, the mark of tremendous respect, but he did not understand how a sissy could survive in America. You saw the film stars, the actors, in their beautiful suits and handmade shoes but they were a little class of tinpot gods. Some element of masculinity was missing in them (apart from John Wayne). Women couldn't see it – they responded to their sex appeal, but sex appeal wasn't everything.

Stephen's father believed his son needed basic survival instincts. Some things operated as a dark shadow in the recesses of his mind, primeval hunches. The weak, he believed, were prey for the carrion eaters. His own parents, he said, had been turned back from Ellis Island, diseased with tuberculosis, the chalk cross on their backs crucifying them. Simon Newman had refused to get back on board the ship; he would make his own way in life, and he had done so. He never saw his mother and father again, or spoke of them. Stephen grew up knowing all of this. He had not been protected from the terrible past, but the

point, he learned, was that it *was* the past. He was in America now and, unlike either of his parents, American-born.

It was, his father told him, a different country in those days. Si had been found on the street and taken in by a childless couple and things generally went on from there. He had perfected the orphan shtick, moving from comfortable home to comfortable home, taking what he wanted, travelling like a hobo across the country until he arrived in Los Angeles and there was nowhere further to go. Stephen was in awe of his father.

They lived on the rim of the Pacific Ocean, which curled around half the globe, an unending potential for self-sufficiency in the face of hostile nature. The more Si considered its vast wetness, the more he saw it was the solution, the way to make a man of his son: the sea!

'You want me to go to *sea*?' said Stephen, stunned.

The ocean was a familiar quantity. You drove to the beach with your mother and father on holiday weekends and there it was, cold, wet, semi-dangerous. You unwrapped beach food and ate, and after a couple of hours of mandatory rest, during which your mother and sisters read a movie magazine and your father brooded silently on the horizon, his white legs sticking out of polka-dot navy blue shorts, you were permitted to splash around in the waves.

But his mother had a cousin in the maritime union, down in San Diego. This side of the family were the Cubans. The men wore gold signet rings and combed their hair back in oiled quiffs, like Elvis; the women all wore shoes with unfeasibly high heels and showed off a red-lacquered big toe.

'But I want to go to college and study chemistry,' said Stephen.

'So who says you can't do both?'

With a maritime-union ticket in his wallet, he shipped out every summer from the age of seventeen, starting out on the West Coast, making cruise-ship runs to Hawaii and up to Alaska. In

1965, he crossed America for the first time, saw New York for the first time, went down to the union hall, to the open outcry.

The hiring boss shouted, 'SS *United States*, seven cabin-class bellboys!' and he ran and slammed down his union card on the table.

'Who's your rabbi?' the man with the wedge-shaped teeth said, picking up the card.

'Enrique Salvídar.'

'How do you know him?'

'He's my mother's cousin.'

'College kid?'

'Yes, sir.'

This was the first of his four-day hops to Europe, on the fastest cruise ship in the world – to Southampton, then Bremerhaven in Germany, down to Le Havre in France, looping back to Southampton and returning home. One year, on another ship, he got all the way to Italy. You could do three or four of these in a summer and not have to borrow a cent to pay for your education.

As for bringing him to manhood, on shore leave in Naples the purser offered to show him certain spots in the city. A month later he recollected a teenage prostitute lying in bed, looking at the wondrous contents of an American pigskin wallet, and he remembered where he had left his UCLA library card. When he had first enrolled in college, his father had held it reverently in his scarred hand. 'With this card,' he had told Stephen, 'a *whole world* of knowledge will open up to you.'

In 1968 he graduated and, with the thirst for travel awakened by too-brief shore leaves, decided to apply for a Rhodes scholarship, which, he explained patiently several times to his disbelieving parents, was postgraduate studies at Oxford University and came with everything you needed to live outside America, including a pre-paid ticket on the ship he already knew, the SS *United States*. Their son, a prince at Oxford.

But his father thought his boy was in one respect a dope. His was the ignorance of the people with letters after their name and pictures of themselves in black robes receiving scrolls (that very photograph, gold-framed, hung on the wall next to the cabinet containing china teacups with flowers painted on them, never used). On the sly he cashed in Stephen's ticket and handed him the whole amount in dollar bills in an envelope. 'Go over as a seaman earning a seaman's pay,' he said, 'and arrive at Oxford University like a lord.'

What could you do? His father was a man of the Old World – not the old world *he* was going to, but a place more primitive, atavistic in its inclinations, a peasant land. His father thought like a peasant. The furs he schlepped around all day were not so much for him the product of a master furrier's expertise but the excess from the meat the caveman bludgeoned with a bone. Stephen loved his father. He respected him for being a hard worker and a good provider. His parents seemed to have a good marriage; they enjoyed dancing and sometimes he had caught them in a kiss, sitting together in the car, parked outside their building. Years later, when he was married himself, he suspected that the marriage had always been glued together by sex. That his father saw a beautiful Latina woman with her black hair in a heavy roll above her forehead and powdered cheeks, while she saw in him a man confident, despite his scrawny size, in his masculinity, who had worked his way across America alone.

Stephen kissed his parents goodbye, kissed his sisters, smelt the riotous cheap scent coming off their necks. He was twenty-two and certain that he was the next Einstein.

Off the ship sailed, backing out from Manhattan, the Statue of Liberty receding, Ellis Island receding behind him, and in that high-tide moment, it was all over: all was done with America.