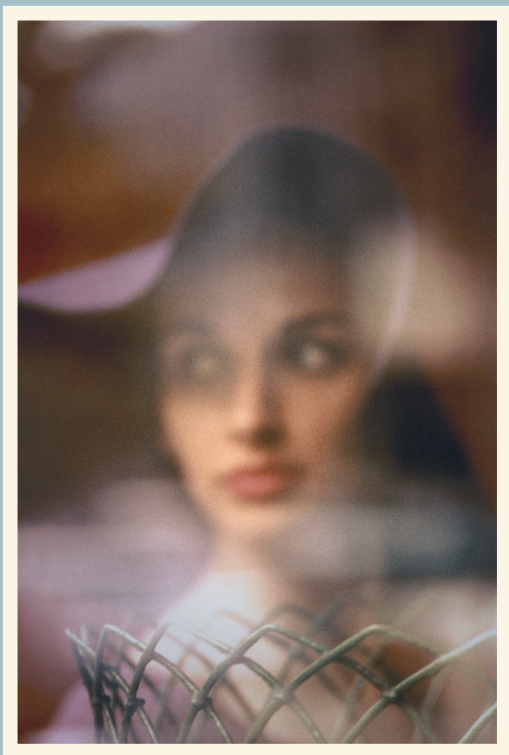


The Image of Her

A Novel



Simone de BEAUVOIR

TRANSLATED BY LAUREN ELKIN

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SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Simone de Beauvoir was born in Paris in 1908. In 1929 she became the youngest person ever to obtain the *agrégation* in philosophy at the Sorbonne, placing second to Jean-Paul Sartre. She taught at the lycées at Marseille and Rouen from 1931–1937, and in Paris from 1938–1943. After the war she emerged as one of the leaders of the existentialist movement, working with Sartre on *Les Temps modernes*. The author of several books including *The Mandarins* (1954), which was awarded the Prix Goncourt, Beauvoir was one of the most influential thinkers of her generation. She died in 1986.

LAUREN ELKIN

Lauren Elkin is the author of several books, including *Scaffolding*, *Art Monsters* and *Flâneuse*, as well as the translator of Simone de Beauvoir's previously unpublished novel *The Inseparables*. After twenty years in Paris, she now lives in London.

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The Mandarins
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NON-FICTION

The Ethics of Ambiguity
The Second Sex
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To Claude Lanzmann

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1

— What an extraordinary October, said Gisèle Dufrène.

They all agree, they smile, the summer heat falls from the grey-blue sky – what do they have that I don't? – their gazes skim the scene before them, straight out of *Plaisir de France* or *Votre Maison*, the farm bought for next to nothing, all right, a little more than that, and done up by Jean-Charles at great expense (*Give or take a million*, said Gilbert), the roses against the stone wall, the chrysanthemums, the asters, the dahlias, *the most beautiful in the whole Ile-de-France*, said Dominique, the screen and the blue and violet chairs – how daring! – breaking up the green of the lawn, ice clinking in the glasses. Houdan kisses Dominique's hand. She is slim in her black trousers and bright shirt, her hair very light, somewhere between blonde and white; from behind she looks no older than thirty. *Nobody knows how to entertain like you, Dominique*. (At exactly this moment, in another garden, completely different, but exactly the same, someone is

pronouncing these same words and the same smile appears on someone else's face. *What a magnificent Sunday!* Why am I thinking this?)

Everything was perfect: the sun and the breeze, the barbecue, the thick steaks, the salads, the fruit, the wine. Gilbert told stories of his hunting trips in Kenya, and then he became absorbed by this Japanese puzzle – he had six more pieces to put in their places – and Laurence suggested they play the Ferryman's Challenge, that sounds like fun, they love to astonish themselves and laugh at each other.' It takes a lot out of her, that's why she feels depressed now, I go in cycles. Louise is playing with her cousins in the rear of the garden; Catherine is reading before the fireplace where a feeble flame goes on burning; she looks like all those happy young girls who like to read, lying stretched out on the carpet. *Don Quixote*. Last week it was *Quentin Durward*, but that's not why she was crying in the night. Why then? Louise was very upset about it. *Maman, Catherine is sad, she cries at night*. She likes her teachers, she has a new best friend, she looks well, the house is a happy one.

— Still trying to come up with a slogan? says Dufrène.

— Somehow I have to convince people to cover their walls with wood panelling.

When she daydreams, people think she's trying to come up with an advertising slogan. It's useful. Around her everyone is talking about Jeanne Texcier's failed suicide attempt. A cigarette in her left hand, her right hand open and raised as if

to ward off interruptions, Dominique says, in her throaty, authoritarian voice:

— She's not very bright, if she has a career it's thanks to her husband, but in any case, when you're one of the most high-profile women in Paris, you don't behave like a simpering little shop girl!

In another garden, completely different, but exactly the same, someone is saying: *Dominique Langlois? If she has a career it's thanks to Gilbert Mortier.* And it's not fair, she got into the radio business by the back door in '45, and she fought her way to get where she is, she worked like a dog, trampling right over anyone who got in her way. Why did they take such pleasure in tearing each other to pieces? They also say, and Gisèle Dufrène thinks it for sure, that if Maman got her hooks into Gilbert it was out of self-interest. It's true she could never have afforded this house or these trips without him, but he brought her something else, too; she was completely distraught after she left Papa (he moped around the house like a lost soul, how callously she left him as soon as Marthe was married); it's thanks to Gilbert that she became such a strong, confident woman. (Of course, there were less charitable ways of looking at it.)

Hubert and Marthe return from the forest with their arms full of foliage. Head back, a smile frozen on her lips, briskly she marches on, like a saint drunk on God's happy love. That was the role she had played since she'd found religion. They return to their places on the blue and violet

cushions, Hubert lights the pipe that he is doubtless the last man in France to call *my old puffer*. His frozen smile, his excessive padding. When he travels he wears black sunglasses, saying *I love to travel incognito*. A very good dentist who conscientiously keeps up with the horse races in his spare time. I understand why Marthe had to invent her own sources of satisfaction.

— In Europe, in the summer, there's not an inch of room to lie down on any of the beaches, says Dominique. In Bermuda, there are immense beaches, nearly deserted, where nobody knows you.

— For travellers on a budget, says Laurence, deadpan.

— And Tahiti? Why didn't you go back to Tahiti, Gisèle asks.

— In 1955, Tahiti was great. But now it's worse than Saint-Tropez. So banal.

Twenty years ago. Papa suggested Florence, or Grenada, and she'd said *Everyone goes there, it's so banal*. The four of them tooling around in the car like the Fenouillard family, she'd joked. He went walking without us in Italy and Greece, and we holidayed in chic places; at least, Dominique thought they were chic at the time. Now she crosses the ocean to sunbathe. For Christmas, Gilbert is taking her to Baalbek.

— They say they have magnificent beaches in Brazil, totally empty, says Gisèle. And you can stop off in Brasília. I would so like to see Brasília!

— Oh, no! says Laurence. The housing estates around Paris are depressing enough. But a whole city of them?

— You're just like your father, says Dominique. So old-fashioned.

— Who isn't? asks Jean-Charles. Even nowadays, when they're inventing rockets and robots, people still think as though it's the nineteenth century.

— Not me, says Dominique.

— But you, you are exceptional in every way, says Gilbert in a conclusive tone (or an emphatic one, rather; he always keeps an ironic distance from whatever it is he's saying).

— At any rate, the construction workers who built the city share my opinion: they chose to keep their wooden houses.

— They hardly had a choice in the matter, dear Laurence, says Gilbert. The rent in Brasília is more than they can afford. The hint of a smile slightly curved his mouth, as if he were apologising for his superiority.

— Brasília is over, says Dufrène. It's stuck in the kind of architectural vision where the roof, a door, the wall, and the fireplace each have their own distinct existence. What we're trying to do now is create a synthesised house, where each element is versatile – the roof blends into the wall and flows into the middle of the courtyard.

Laurence is unhappy with herself; she has said something

idiotic, clearly. Look at what comes of talking about things you don't understand. *Never talk about things you don't understand*, Mlle Houchet used to say. But in that case one would never open one's mouth to speak. She silently listens to Jean-Charles describe the city of the future. For no discernible reason, it delights him, the idea of these wonders to come, which he will never see with his own eyes. He was so pleased to learn that today's man is several centimetres taller than medieval man, who himself was taller than prehistoric man. They're lucky to be able to get so interested in things. Once again, just as heatedly, Dufrène and Jean-Charles are debating the crisis in architecture.

— They have to find the funding, of course, says Jean-Charles, but by other means. To give up on the power of dissuasion would be to fall out of History.

Nobody answers; in the silence comes Marthe's ecstatic voice:

— If only people would collectively agree on disarmament! Have you read Pope Paul VI's latest message?

Dominique cuts her off with impatience.

— People who have every right to think so have told me that if war broke out, it would take just twenty years for humanity to return to our present level of civilisation.

Gilbert raises his head, he has only four pieces left to place.

— There won't be a war. The gap between capitalist countries and socialist ones will soon disappear entirely.

Because just now we're in the midst of the great revolution of the twentieth century: producing is more important than possessing.

So why spend so much money arming ourselves? Laurence wonders. But Gilbert has an answer for everything, and she's not about to put her foot in it again. In any case, Jean-Charles has already replied: *Without the bomb, we would fall out of History*. What does that mean, exactly? It would surely be a catastrophe, everyone looks very worried.

Gilbert turns amiably towards her.

— You must come on Friday. I want to play you my new high-fidelity system.

— The same one as Karim and Alexander of Yugoslavia, says Dominique.

— It's truly a marvel. Once you've heard it, you can never go back to listening to music on an ordinary machine.

— Then I really don't want to hear it, says Laurence. I so love listening to music. (It's not true, actually. I'm just saying that to be funny.)

Jean-Charles seems very interested:

— How much do you have to pay, minimum, to get a really good high-fidelity stereo?

— At the least, the very least, you can get a mono speaker for 300,000 old francs. But this isn't that, not at all.

— To have something really good, do you think you have to spend around a million? asks Dufrène.

— Listen: a good speaker, in mono, is worth at least

600,000 to a million. In stereo, at least two million. I recommend getting mono rather than a mediocre stereo. A good amp-preamp will run you about 500,000 francs.

— That's what I said, at least a million, says Dufrène with a sigh.

— There are worse ways to spend a million francs, says Gilbert.

— If Vergne gets the Roussillon job, I'm buying us one, says Jean-Charles to Laurence. He turns to Dominique:

— He has this incredible idea for one of those vacation complexes they're building there.

— Vergne always has incredible ideas. But they do not often see the light of day, says Dufrène.

— They will. Do you know him? Jean-Charles asks Gilbert. He's amazing to work with; the whole studio is so enthusiastic. They're not just carrying out plans, they're creating something.

— He's the greatest architect of his generation, Dominique says. At the very avant-garde of urban planning.

— Still, I would rather be on Monnod's team, says Dufrène. We're not creating something, we're just carrying out plans. But we make more money.

Hubert takes his pipe from his mouth.

— He's got a point.

Laurence gets up; she smiles at her mother:

— Can I steal a few of your dahlias?

— Of course.

Marthe gets up as well; she steers her sister off to the side.

— Did you see Papa on Wednesday? How is he?

— At the house he's always in a good mood. He fought with Jean-Charles, for a change.

— Jean-Charles doesn't understand Papa either.

Marthe gazes up at the heavens.

— He's so different from other people. There's something other-worldly about him. Music, poetry – for him they're a form of prayer.

Laurence leans over the dahlias; this kind of language annoys her. Of course he has something about him that the others don't, that I don't (but what else do they have that I also lack?). Roses, red, yellow, almost orange. She holds the magnificent dahlias tightly in her hand.

— Did you have a good day, my darlings? asks Dominique.

— Marvellous, says Marthe fervently.

— Marvellous, Laurence echoes.

The light is fading, she's not upset about having to leave. She hesitates. She's waited until the last minute; asking her mother for something still intimidates her as much now as it did when she was fifteen.

— There's something I want to ask you.

— What is it? Dominique's voice is cold.

— About Serge. He wants to leave university. He'd like to work in radio or television.

— Did your father put you up to this?

— I met Bernard and Georgette at Papa's.

— How are they? Are they still playing at Baucis and Philemon?

— Oh, I barely saw them.

— Tell your father once and for all that I am not an employment agency. I think it's disgraceful the way people try to take advantage of me. I've never asked anything of anyone.

— You can't blame Papa for wanting to help his nephew, says Marthe.

— I blame him for not being able to do anything himself. Dominique held up a hand to ward off protest. If he was a man of religion, if he'd joined the Trappists, I could understand. (Oh no, thinks Laurence.) But he chose mediocrity instead.

She could not forgive him for having become a parliamentary draftsman and not the brilliant lawyer she thought she was marrying. A dead end, she called him.

— It's late, says Laurence. I'm going to go and powder my nose.

She could not stand by and let her mother attack her father, but to defend him would be worse. Always this pang in the heart when she thought of him, this feeling of regret. For no reason: I've never taken Maman's side.

— I'm going up as well, I have to change, says Dominique.

— I'll look after the children, says Marthe.

Convenient. Ever since she'd entered the sainthood, she appropriated all drudgery to herself. Her joys are so lofty that we can leave her to them without feeling guilty about it.

Touching up her hair in her mother's bedroom – this Spanish rustic decor really is too pretty – Laurence makes one last attempt:

— Is there really nothing you can do for Serge?

— No.

Dominique joins her at the mirror.

— Would you look at the state of me! At my age, a woman who works all day and goes out every night ends up looking a wreck. I've got to get some sleep.

Laurence scrutinises her mother in the mirror. She is perfect, the very picture of a woman who is ageing well. *A woman who is ageing*. Dominique refuses this image of herself. She is showing weakness for the first time. Illness, hard knocks, until now she's taken it all in her stride. But suddenly she looks panicked:

— I can't believe I'll be seventy one day.

— You're holding up better than any other woman, says Laurence.

— My body, fine, there's no one I envy. But look at this.

She indicates around her eyes, her neck. It's clear she's no longer in her forties.

— OK, you're no longer in your twenties, says Laurence. But loads of men prefer women who've lived a bit. Look at Gilbert.

— Gilbert, she says. I'm killing myself going out like this, all to keep him. It may come back to haunt me.

— Oh, come on.

Dominique puts on her Balenciaga suit. Never Chanel, people spend a fortune on it just to look like they got dressed at a flea market. She mutters:

— That bitch Marie-Claire. She obstinately refuses to divorce him, just to annoy me.

— She'll give in eventually.

Marie-Claire is surely saying: *that bitch Dominique*. Back in the days of Lucile de Saint-Chamont, Gilbert still lived with his wife, no questions asked. Lucile had a husband and children. Dominique had forced him to separate from Marie-Claire; if he had given in it was because it suited him, of course, but all the same, Laurence had thought her mother had acted somewhat aggressively.

— Look, living with Gilbert isn't without risks. He loves his freedom.

— As do you.

— Yes.

Dominique turns this way and that in front of the three-panel mirror and smiles. In fact, she is delighted to dine with the Verdelets; she is genuinely impressed by government ministers. How malicious I am, thinks Laurence. She's her mother; she feels affection towards her. But she is also a stranger. Who is hiding behind the images that dance across the mirrors? Maybe no one at all.

— Is all well with you?

— Yes, fine. I go from triumph to triumph.

— The girls?