

Shirley Hazzard

A PROFILE

BY LACY CRAWFORD



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHIRLEY HAZZARD

IN THE FIRST months of 1947, the writer Shirley Hazzard, then sixteen, sailed into Kure, Japan, the port of Hiroshima. The arrival proved indelible. She would later write, “You could just see an arc of coastal shapes, far out from ruined docks, hills with rare lights and a black calligraphy of trees fringing the silhouette of steep islands.” The lines are from her novel *The Great Fire*, which won the 2003 National Book Award. Much earlier in her career, her first two books, a story collection, *Cliffs*

of Fall (1963), and a novella, *The Evening of the Holiday* (1966), had been published almost in their entirety in *The New Yorker*. William Maxwell, one of the magazine’s longtime fiction editors, remembered receiving Hazzard’s first story with a little note inside indicating that there was no need to return the manuscript if it was unacceptable for publication. The story “was an astonishment to the editors because it was the work of a finished literary artist about whom they knew nothing whatever,” Maxwell recalled. He and Hazzard became close friends, but he never discovered how

she learned to write. “She must have gone through a period of apprenticeship of one kind or another, but under whose eyes?”

The Great Fire, with its account of postwar Hiroshima and the years that followed, might have been Hazzard’s answer to Maxwell’s question. The novel is a love story about a girl of Hazzard’s age, living, as Hazzard did, with her overbearing parents in the Far East in 1947. The girl has an adoring older suitor, their love having begun with books. Literature saves them in a world devastated by war. Though the lovers are not destined for each other, the girl will become a writer.

For the past forty-six years, Hazzard has lived in an apartment high above Manhattan’s Upper East Side. A south-facing picture window overlooks spiny Midtown, and a small, north-facing room bare as a cell is Hazzard’s writing studio. On the bright southern windowsill, a row of orchids puts out third and fourth blooms. The flowers tremble all day at the sound of construction through the walls. The building, at long last, is going co-op. In the real estate sense, Hazzard is safe, though the pounding is unnerving, and more so the sense of dismantling, all the old families gone and nothing but drop cloths and paint fumes in the halls. The workmen have taped over the number on her door, so Hazzard comes out into the hall to greet visitors. She ushers her guests into a living room lined with masterpieces downy with rereading. One has the sense, weaving through unmarked halls to find the writer quietly at home, of a long distance traveled.

“When I was fifteen, sixteen,” Hazzard explains, “by the time we went to Japan, I had already lived deeply in poetry and had a large memory for it. Imagination was hungry and adventurous.” Hazzard’s imagination was filled with the green heaths and sooty streets of English literature, not the arid expanses of Australia, where, growing up in suburban Sydney, Hazzard felt orphaned from civilization.

She dreamed of leaving Australia and memorized the ports of call for ships heading to England—Melbourne, Adelaide, Fremantle, Colombo, Bombay, Aden, Port Said. When she was ten, war broke out. Ships departed, ports darkened. Hazzard and her sister, Valerie, then thirteen, were evacuated with their schoolmates from the Queenwood School for Girls to a lonely, repurposed estate in the Blue Mountains. Valerie “crumbled, burst into tears on being there,” recalls Hazzard, whose parents quickly brought Valerie home, leaving the younger and less demonstrative Shirley alone. In the countryside, Hazzard spent hours pondering the curious fact of Italian prisoners, dozens of whom were being held on the estate’s vast property. “They wore terrible, wine-red uniforms to make them stand out in case they escaped. And I thought, Where on earth are they going to escape to? They smiled and waved. We didn’t wave back.”

Hazzard consoled herself with the oceanic store of verse and prose from which, now at the age of seventy-nine, she still recites without pause. Early in her life, Hazzard learned a resilience fed by a dedication to the value of insight and precise expression. The writer Annabel Davis-Goff, her friend of many years, explains, “I think she at a very young age was a fully formed person with a fully formed sensibility, which is not quite the same thing as maturity. An extraordinary mind, beyond even the creative intelligence.”

Hazzard left school for good at fifteen when her father, Reginald, was given a post with the Australian Ministry of Trade in Hong Kong and took his family overseas. Their tiny ship sailed for five weeks. Kure, near Hiroshima, was their first port of call. Coming into the Sea of Japan, Hazzard spotted the lights of islands and rose before dawn. She had long dark hair that was russet in the sun; the daughter of a Welshman and a Scot, she was rail thin, already beautiful, with blue eyes fixed on the far shore, and she caught the attention of the ship’s captain, who invited her up to the bridge. “I’ll never forget it,” she says. “It was absolutely wonderful. This vast body of water, and the towns along the edges of the sea; we had never seen that architecture, the Asian masts in the harbors. And then we came into Kure, and it was just full of sunken ships, lopsided, capsized.”

Or as Aldred Leith, hero of *The Great Fire*, tells it: “The little ship, sailing to its appointments, passed among islands all glorious with morning, on a blue course channeled by minesweepers.” For forty years danger and reprieve and the drama of arrivals have been dominant motifs in Hazzard’s fiction. Each of her four novels begins with a lone character arriving. They are classical beginnings, heralding narratives deeply rooted in place and intimately concerned with the traveler’s transformations.

Hiroshima provided a formative landscape of memory and imagination. “The army met us with Jeep and a driver,” Hazzard recalls, “as that was the way one got around then, if you were a foreigner in these places. We knew from newsreels how in Britain cities were blitzed, but here you were driving along and a city had been completely razed. There weren’t great walls standing up and some buildings more or less intact; it had all been pulverized. Ashes, a huge heap of powder going on for miles. Dust and rocks. Oh, God, it was terrible. And it was some time, months, before it really began to sink in. I thought about it a lot, the strange sight of this place that had been completely erased. I didn’t even realize the impression it made till later on when I began to write about those things and I realized that that had been a crucial point of observation.”

A girl arrives on a foreign shore. Richness and devastation merge; the world breaks open in the place where it is most broken. Now almost eighty, Shirley

Hazzard has made a career as one of the most passionate apologists for peace in the English language.

“YES, IT IS *Make love, not war*,” Hazzard says, decisively, of the theme across her work. She does not use idioms, but this one she repeated often in interviews about *The Great Fire*, a work that took almost twenty-five years to write. During those years, Hazzard also produced *Countenance of Truth: The United Nations and the Waldheim Case*, a treatise critical of the organization, and *Greene on Capri: A Memoir*, a portrait of her friend Graham Greene, but above all she had been caring for her husband, the renowned Flaubert biographer and translator Francis Steegmuller. Twenty-five years Hazzard’s senior, Steegmuller died in 1994 at the age of eighty-eight. In a 1986 essay (“The Incident at Naples”), he recounted the way Hazzard tended to him following a brutal assault suffered at the hands of Neapolitan muggers. On the night he was injured, Hazzard sat on the end of his hospital bed and calmly quoted Petrarch on life’s unpredictability. Hazzard’s composure is at the heart of Steegmuller’s grateful essay, and his portrait of her is prescient of the grace with which she’s faced the cruel irony of being injured herself by muggers in Rome in 2007. She’d just finished coffee with friends and stepped into the street, where she was caught between thieves on Vespas and a tourist with a large purse. Falling, Hazzard smacked her head and shattered her hip. The hip has required multiple surgeries; “my head,” she says without bitterness, “seems not to have been damaged at all.” But after the accident she had to change her life, abbreviating her public schedule and accepting the aid of a live-in assistant. The constant company rankles, as does the sense of fragility.

Getting up from her chair to retrieve a copy of *War and Peace* from the bookshelves and revisit a hallowed passage, she neglects her walking cane, leaving it toppled alongside her chair. Then, carrying the novel, she crosses the room as though balancing on a high wire, and settles to read of Prince Andrei noticing an old oak sending out a canopy of green. On another afternoon, Hazzard describes an early memory of Australia. Beyond her backyard, where the outback began, goannas slithered in the tall grass—“miniature dinosaurs,” she recalls, “harmless and horrible.” One especially large lizard would come to the back porch to be fed hard-boiled eggs by the maid. “Let’s look it up,” Hazzard says brightly. “I wonder if *goanna* is a corruption of *iguana*.” She gets up and presently returns, lugging a volume of the *OED*, her assistant empty-handed behind her. “Here it is,” Hazzard says, lowering herself carefully. “*Goanna*.” Her etymology is correct. As against the

steady pounding of renovation outside the apartment, the printed word restores certainty. “Now, then,” Hazzard continues, setting the dictionary on the floor.

“What can I do for you?”

The question isn’t a prompt to the interviewer but a signal that Hazzard is listening. Her manners create an overture to thought, slowing the rhythm of exchange: formality as invitation to reflection. The spoken word recovers its resonance. “Tell me, please, how have you been?” she asks and holds my gaze.

Her eyes are a steady blue, quite round. Her hair is auburn and worn in a chignon. When she discovers a smattering of dust across the front of her blue skirt, the result of handling an old book, she stands and spins the skirt round, and you can see the girl in her.

SET IN A world of ruins following the Second World War, *The Great Fire* contains the only happy ending in all of Hazzard’s fiction, and in response to questions about the novel, she has said, “I do believe in the redemptive power of love. Love and art bring us forward.” She knows that love may be made possible *by* art: “If we didn’t have . . . literature, the arts, we might think we’re all living in separate cells and with no connection. Instead we find friendship, affinity, community. We find it in books, and then we know that it’s there in human beings.”

Implicit in her faith is the experience of a girl learning about love from books rather than from her family, and her devotion to language is consummate. “We have a magnificent language, and it grieves me to see it deteriorate into a repetitive, reductive vocabulary,” she explains. On the night she received the National Book Award for *The Great Fire*, Hazzard was preceded at the podium by Stephen King, who was awarded a medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. King’s pleasure was overshadowed by defensiveness, and in a long speech he commented on the business of publishing in folksy tones meant, perhaps, to counter the presumably literary formality of the evening. “But giving this award to a guy like me,” he said,

you can’t sit back, give a self-satisfied sigh and say, “Ah, that takes care of the troublesome pop-lit question. . . .” It’s not good enough. Nor do I have any patience with or use for those who make a point of pride in saying they’ve never read anything by John Grisham, or Tom Clancy, Mary Higgins Clark, or any other popular writer.

What do you think? You get social or academic brownie points for deliberately staying out of touch with your own culture?

Shirley Hazzard, whose life has been dedicated to literature as art, rose to give an impromptu riposte that was graceful in degree but sharp in focus. “I want to say in response to Stephen King,” she said,

that I do not, as I think [King] a little bit seems to do . . . regard literature . . . as competition. We have this huge language so diverse around the earth that I don’t think giving us a reading list of those who are most read at this moment is much of a satisfaction because we are reading in all the ages, which have been an immense inspiration and love to me and are such an excitement.

I can take one of the ancient poems of our language and feel so excited and moved and even sometimes terrified by it that it seems very immediate to me. I don’t see this as *we should read this or we should read that*. We have mysterious inclinations. We have our own intuitions, our individuality toward what we want to read, and we developed that from childhood. We don’t know why. No one can explain it to us.

“She was brilliant,” says her publisher, Jonathan Galassi, who notes that the award for *The Great Fire* was for a lifetime of achievement by a writer whose work is exquisite and rare. “*The Great Fire* is amazing. It is the kind of book that doesn’t really exist anymore. And Hazzard is the kind of writer that doesn’t really exist anymore. She continues a great cultural tradition that saw a social and political break in the sixties. There’s a certain gentility to her; she would have considered the kinds of values and experimentation and social upheaval of those years as indecorous.”

Hazzard’s devotion to high art is rooted in erudition and a romantic commitment to its pleasures, which were central to the life she and Steegmuller shared. That their life of books and art, opera and travel, happened to be split between Manhattan, an apartment in Naples, and an island home in Capri suggests bourgeois ease, though her work, including stern commentary on the devolution of literary criticism from aesthetic endeavor to sociopolitical science (following “the pestilential modern mania for classification”), demonstrates a rigorous defense of high culture against laziness and inattention masquerading as countercultural reform. In every respect, the acceleration of modern life leaves her cold. She has never owned a television. But neither would she defend the pious literary types Stephen King disparages, the aptly named “literary circles” that, as she once wrote, “endlessly circle literature and are almost never themselves engaged in creative activity. Like the figures in the lunettes and spandrels of the Sistine Chapel, they stand round the verge of Creation.”

Stephen King located his “own culture” in John Grisham and Tom Clancy. Hazzard would point to millennia of achievement, from Ovid to Graham Greene; she esteems permanence over popularity, and she champions writers whose works fall out of print or who fail to find readers for commercial rather than aesthetic reasons. Hazzard reviewed Jean Rhys’s first novel, *Quartet*, for the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* before *Wide Sargasso Sea* had secured Rhys a following. She has recalled introducing the subject of Rhys’s work in the New York literary circle and “getting nowhere.”

Many of today’s books are written at a level easier to understand by readers who do not intend to give their whole attention, or who were raised on television or text messages, or who are not engaged by highly textured, sophisticated sentences. Hazzard’s prose demands a reader’s alert attention and, in return, offers high rewards of pleasure. “I don’t read her books late at night,” says Davis-Goff. “Reading Shirley you can’t skip a half-page here and there.” Hazzard’s vocabulary surprises and challenges. Her diction is incantatory. It’s a language of infatuation with the world. Words, for example, Shirley Hazzard uses for boats: *Sloops. Caiques. Ferries. Warships. Sampan. Barks, jerks, junks, packet ships. Yachts, dinghies. Transatlantic liners. Destroyers. Vessels. Trawlers, tankers, tugs. Yawls. Three-masters; quadri-remes. Ketch. Craft.*

HAZZARD’S PARENTS, Catherine Stein and Reginald Hazzard, met when both worked for the engineering firm that constructed the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the 1920s. Hazzard likes to say that her parents met on the bridge, and in the beginning of her novel *The Transit of Venus*, which won the 1981 National Book Critics Circle Award, the parents of the heroine die on a ferry that capsizes under the bridge. The sinking of Hazzard’s parents was less sudden. As Reginald began to make a career, first in munitions and later as a diplomat, Catherine, who was “very witty and had some originality,” experienced more loss than gain. “She wanted more flair from life,” says Hazzard. “A woman like that really was a bit broken down by matrimony and housekeeping, no alternatives. I remember once, before we went abroad, she spoke of getting a job, and my father said, ‘Absolutely, no.’ It would have been disgraceful. Part of it was just what was expected of women at that time, but part also was that he was terribly stingy with her. She wanted some money of her own, and he wasn’t having any of that. It was terribly cruel.”

Between Shirley and her sister, Shirley bore most of the weight of her mother’s frustrations and ambitions. “I was very close to her, especially when I was a child,”

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHIRLEY HAZZARD



Shirley, right, and her older sister, Valerie. Sydney, 1935.

Hazzard recalls, “and she loved me very much. More than my sister, which she showed. I don’t know quite how to say that.” As much as Hazzard sought to please her mother, Catherine was never content. It had become clear that Reginald was having affairs; Catherine, meanwhile, raged at home and sparkled outside, “pretty and witty and livened up. Of course we were invited to a million diplomatic parties, and she enjoyed those like anything, but there was always something to criticize. Once we had left a party, she would look back and say, Oh, wasn’t that wonderful? But never when we were there.”

One evening in Hong Kong, where her father took a diplomatic post when Hazzard was a teenager, she accompanied her parents to a cocktail party, and a war-decorated Briton asked her to work for him in the Office of British Intelligence. “I was a little girl, really,” Hazzard recalls. “And the British men in the office had been in the war very young; oh, the things they had seen. I didn’t know anything at all. Well, I knew something—I knew poetry—but so did they. We were all full of poetry and had a whole world of references that we didn’t have to explain—allusions, phrases, lines from poems, and it was wonderful.”

Hazzard’s job was to mind a wall map of Far Eastern waters, on which flagged pins represented merchant ships sailing through the region. As the ships issued their positions, Hazzard moved the pins accordingly. But when she realized that her map was not consulted for days at a time, she grew lax. As she wrote in the 1967 essay “Canton More Far,” “There were certain ships—those going to Macao or Swatow or Amoy—that sailed from Hong Kong and returned within a matter of days; and those, so far as I was concerned, never left port.” Hazzard’s delinquency was discovered and forgiven, and she was given a short assignment in the field, sent to visit with the family of a man who was suspected of espionage; Hazzard knew the man’s wife socially,

from the Cricket Club. During an odd weekend with the woman, whose husband was away and whose adult children were on the other side of the globe, Hazzard registered her hostess's loneliness. The encounter made Hazzard too sad to pry into the woman's life. This failure too was forgiven, and Hazzard resumed tracking ships and trading verse in the intelligence office.

Soon Hazzard fell in love with a colleague fifteen years her senior, and the two planned to marry. Then Valerie fell ill with tuberculosis. It's unclear which development represented the greater threat to Hazzard's parents, but the solution was the same: Reginald took a new post in Wellington, New Zealand. It was a better climate for Valerie's lungs and the end of the world for Shirley. Wellington was a return to cultural isolation, but with the added injury of a broken heart. "It's something I can hardly bear even now to think about, the misery of those years," she says. "I had to go where my parents were; my sister was ill. I was eighteen. They had a grip on me."

Her lover, meanwhile, returned to London. The couple exchanged feverish letters. She longed for him to come collect her, imagining it deeply, but the reunion never came to pass. Fifty years later, Hazzard wrote it, her only happy ending: the reunion shared by Helen Driscoll and Aldred Leith in *The Great Fire*. In the final scene, the cruel Driscolls—proxies for Hazzard's parents—have left New Zealand by ship and are unreachable; the girl is wrapped in a blanket asleep on the porch swing, awaiting her lover's arrival. Just past dawn he climbs the steps, takes her up, and they go inside to bed.

But for Hazzard, two long years passed in New Zealand before her father finally received a posting in New York City, and the family moved again. It was 1951; Hazzard was twenty and still at the mercy of her father, whose assignment provided the sole legal validation for his family to live and work on US soil. Not a citizen, not a wife, Hazzard remained a daughter, living in cold, cramped rooms high on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

"My view of it is that, in the early part of Shirley's life, she was very much aware of her powerlessness," says Davis-Goff. "And generationally, of the powerlessness of women." Davis-Goff describes a unique set of challenges for women of Hazzard's generation. "Growing up and being away from home, young and inexperienced, at the beginning of what one used to call the sexual revolution, was a bizarre moment for women. The previous rules had been partly abandoned by society. Girls worked but were paid dramatically less than men. And because the virginity card was no longer a playable one, women had to depend on men's generosity and good nature to marry them. A woman couldn't earn enough to live comfortably and be independent.

So there was a terrible powerlessness and an awareness that being nice and very smart wasn't going to get you anywhere."

Hazzard took a job at the United Nations, "in the dungeons" of the Secretariat. "What was expected of any girl at the time?" she asks. "To get married, ultimately, but the first thing you had to do was type." Hazzard's memories of Hiroshima made it all the more infuriating that she would not be permitted to progress through the Secretariat ranks, which were divided into a largely male professional category and a largely female general service category. "It was the most demoralizing work I've ever done," Hazzard says. "It was deathly because there was no advancement. I never had anything interesting to do, all the years that I was there."

By that time her parents' marriage was dissolving, and when Reginald returned to Sydney, he left behind a financial crisis. Then Valerie married a wealthy American, and they too moved to Australia, leaving Shirley to care for the increasingly mercurial Catherine. Hazzard recalls, "I stayed on in a tiny flat uptown where I had my mother, who was having hysterics all the time. I had to stay at the United Nations or leave the country, because the Australian quota of immigrants to the United States in those years was, sort of, three kangaroos could come in."

Earning forty dollars a week, Hazzard quietly performed the role of spinster daughter. "The idea was, You're here, you're typing; this is what you're supposed to do." She did not run off or quickly marry, though there were many suitors; Hazzard was notably lovely, and she dressed as well as she could afford to. Her friend Phyllis Levin recalls, "I suppose occasionally, on holiday, I saw her in espadrilles." But day after day Hazzard came home from the UN to find her mother in bed, distraught. In Hazzard's depiction of Caroline Bell in *The Transit of Venus*, readers can recognize a version of Hazzard herself. Loveless and alone in London, Caroline Bell is forced to support the horrid Dora—whom Hazzard calls "a very mild dose of my mother." Caroline, in her cold London flat, stares through an iced-up skylight and wishes to die.

She's saved by the arrival of Adam Vail, who glimpses her from the far side of the street one morning and falls in love. For Hazzard, salvation came in the form of an even less likely intervention, aided only by her own uncalculating pursuit of knowledge and poetry.

During the Suez Crisis of 1956, the world's first United Nations peacekeeping force was hastily assembled to address growing tension in Egypt. The UN set up staging offices in Naples and sent Hazzard, who on her employment application five years earlier had written that she knew Italian. In fact, she had only studied it, very briefly, while living in New Zealand, the impetus having been a slim blue

volume of poetry she had found in a bookstore in desolate Wellington. It was John Heath-Stubbs's new translation of the Italian Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi, whose heartbroken laments touched Hazzard so keenly that she started Italian lessons so she might read the poems in the original. By the time she was living in New York, she says, "I'd forgotten every word, but the UN came to me on a Tuesday and said, 'On Friday, you're flying to Rome, and then a couple of days later you're being sent to Naples.' And I had the sense not to say, 'I've forgot everything.' I knew, when I got on that plane in New York—I knew, in one way or another, I was never going back."

Having won a small victory of autonomy, Hazzard arrived in the very city where Leopardi went to die; she found his tomb in the same park where Virgil is said to be buried. "Yes, it's strange," she says. "You can make things come true." She settled deeply into her exile, becoming fluent in the language and in the city's hidden recesses. When spring came, the *ginestra* bloomed on the ash-heaped flanks of Vesuvius, which towers above the south end of the Bay of Naples. *Ginestra* formed the yellow carpet that inspired the title of Leopardi's "mighty, uncompromising" poem of the same name that so moved a heartbroken young woman in New Zealand. The poet meditates on the frivolity of human intentions in the face of mortality. Hazzard recites the lines with the belly-soft intonations of a lullaby:

The noble nature is the one
 who dares to lift his mortal eyes
 to confront our common destiny
 and, with honest words,
 subtracting nothing from the truth,
 admits the pain allotted as our fate,
 and our poor and feeble state

As it had for Leopardi, the city's beauty delighted and offered Hazzard a buoyancy. "Life, for me," she would later write, "has been a succession of such destined accidents, when what was latent in the reading mind and in the aroused imagination acquired reality in daily life." Galassi, who is dedicating his new translation of Leopardi's poems to Hazzard, says, "Italy was a kind of nexus for Shirley. It was the bath in which creativity happened for her."

In the summer that her foreign assignment was ending, Hazzard became gravely ill with hepatitis, not uncommonly contracted from the polluted bay. She suffered her fever alone, in rented rooms looking out over the sea, where, at low tide, a submerged reef was revealed to be the ruins of Roman baths: "everything tinged with

yellow.” A similar fate befalls Jenny, the young heroine of Hazzard’s 1970 novel *The Bay of Noon*, who also spends a year in Naples at work for a major international organization. Jenny awakens from fever, ravenously hungry, and finds a friend has come to visit her. Jenny must eat, and later her friend will become her first lover. One imagines the ever-thrifty, filial young Hazzard indulging her appetites for the first time. As Jenny tells it, “Here, literally, I had come to my senses.”

A recovering Hazzard wanted to linger. “I had sick leave, so I had a wonderful stretch of weeks. Winter was coming on, but I thought, I’ve never been to the north of Italy. So I took this really very lonely journey. I didn’t know anybody. I went to Venice and the Veneto plain as the season turned, and there was I, trotting around; I was twenty-something, and I saw Italians looking, not unkindly, but wondering, What on earth is she doing sitting in this café in Venice, all alone, with the cold weather coming, reading a book? And of course in the evenings it was terribly lonely, but I learnt that alone one observes many things that one wouldn’t if one had a companion.”

At some point, Hazzard took up a notebook, filling the pages from back to front. “I didn’t think my thoughts were important enough to write from the front,” she recalled. But she loved the sense of possibility in doing something she simply chose to do. “I knew my days at the UN were numbered. In a way, that’s how I was able to begin to write. I needed leisure; I needed a little money. That was the beginning of it.”

Not long after Hazzard’s return to New York, her mother left for London to begin again. “The relief when I took her to the ship—oh!” recalls Hazzard. “I went back to my little apartment and sat on the bed and thought, Whew!” Hazzard moved to a flat in the East Fifties near the UN so she could walk home at lunchtime. “I wanted to write so much that I’d come home at lunch to write, and I’d write at night and on weekends, and I’d like to say I was exhausted, but I wasn’t. I was stimulated because I was doing something I liked instead of writing memoranda.” She wrote a few poems but put them away. “I understood very well, because the great thing of my life has been great poetry, that I was not fitted for that. I wasn’t imagining that I could be noticed as a writer at all; it was only a way of expressing oneself.”

The following summer and for several years afterward, Hazzard returned to Italy, staying at Solaia, the Tuscan home of the Vivante family, who had been resisters during the war. For some years afterward their only means of subsistence was taking in lodgers, who joined the circle around matriarch Elena, a poet and painter, and her husband, a philosopher. Before Hazzard’s time, Eugenio Montale had been a steady presence, as well as the poet Camillo Sbarbaro, who was among the men (and women) besotted with Elena. “She had a selflessness that was not sacrificial,” recalls

Hazzard, “and a quite extraordinary penetration of human situations. Everyone who knew her felt this, that she had some kind of superior grasp of what life was and what people’s temperaments were. She was an extraordinary person.” Through the summer, Elena presided over long dinners around the table in the villa’s garden; from her room, Hazzard had a view up to the towers of Siena, cypress trees high on each ridge, fields of sunflowers patched across the hills.

There, on the good matriarch’s watch, in the summer of 1959, Hazzard wrote a short story about an awkward young man who astonishes a group of travelers at a Tuscan villa one summer evening when he reads his poetry in the garden. She put “Harold” in an envelope and walked to the nearest *ufficio postale* and mailed it to *The New Yorker*.

“One day I was in the great kitchen of Elena’s house when the mail was brought,” Hazzard says. “The postman came on a little motorbike and was always invited in. Elena went to meet him, and then she returned to me, saying, ‘This is for you.’ It was a letter from William Maxwell. I read it standing by the kitchen table, and then handed the letter back to Elena to read, and she embraced me. The letter said, ‘Of course we will publish your story. And if you have other stories, we’d like to see them.’ I thought, I don’t have other stories, but I soon will have.”

HAROLD, THE YOUNG poet of Hazzard’s first story, is shown to have a precarious hold on his talent. His hands work to gather the sheaf of pages on which his poems are written; he shuffles them clumsily at table, and in the last moment of the story the assembled diners hear him drop them all in a cascade on the villa’s floor. It’s unclear if his gift will survive his youth. But with this story’s composition, Hazzard had already reached the other side of a difficult pass in her own development as a writer—the confidence it took to begin writing in her notebooks had been sustained in writing meant for others to read. Now she filled her notebooks first page to last. Later, back home in New York, she took her stories to William Maxwell’s office for him to read while she sat there waiting. Almost always, he’d turn the last page and say, Yes.

The stories he saw, one after another, were about doomed love: a young woman is in an affair that cannot continue, with an ending either recent (as in a plane crash) or imminent (as in the case of an already married man), and the woman tries to take the measure of the catastrophe. Her scramble to understand holds feeling at bay and provides a brief reprieve. Then, as the tragedy is grasped and the story ends, the reader experiences a painfully precise sympathy. Characteristic of Hazzard’s early stories is this revelation of first heartbreak:

Up to this, she had led a life sheltered not from rancor and mistrust but from intimacy; nothing could convince her that this first sharing of her secret existence, more significant even than the offering of her person, represented less than it appeared to. That circumstances might oblige him to withdraw from her she perfectly understood; that he actually felt himself to be less committed appalled her. It confounded all her assumptions, that something so deeply attested should prove totally unpredictable.

Hazzard's sharpest knife is insight, and her ability to move accurately within her characters' emotions is the most animating aspect of her narration. In "A Place in the Country," Nettie, a teenage girl who has been having an affair with her elder cousin's husband, watches her betrayed cousin, May, retreat down the hall with "the walk of a woman who has dealt with men in a straightforward way and must suffer the consequences." In this flash of the girl's perception, Hazzard reveals that the girl doesn't see her older cousin's power, and in the end the girl will end up alone.

Hazzard resists sympathizing with her heroines. A hallmark of her fiction is the fateful way in which characters bear responsibility for their own misfortunes. Hazzard's narration has no blind spots; her characterizations have a sort of klieg-light exposure, but handled with elegance they result in a poetics of interiority in which drama occurs more in the tension between characters and their awakenings than in the interactions between the characters themselves.

In moments, however, when man and woman come together, it's flint and steel. Hazzard's readers share recollections of these moments not unlike the way sports fans recall touchdown drives. Davis-Goff, who teaches literature at Bennington, doesn't ordinarily take her students through line readings, but she makes an exception for a passage from "A Place in the Country." The scene occurs at an evening's end, when dinner guests depart and Nettie and her lover, Clem, are left alone to pursue their affair:

Vernon took Nettie's hand briefly and released it. He followed Sarah into the garden, and Nettie stood where he had left her, behind the open door. Clem, holding the door handle, watched them go to their car. He called good night, and waved once or twice with his free hand. Sarah called out that the grass was wet. A car door, improperly closed, was banged several times before Vernon started the engine.

When the sound of the car receded, Clem closed the front door and switched off the outside lights. He linked across the lock a small gilt chain in which May had complete confidence. Now, thought Nettie, he will hesitate and smile. Instead, he turned at once with a grave, concerned face, and took her into his arms.

The sound is of angry hearts on silent rails. “Look, I tell my students,” says Davis-Goff. “Look at how she’s doing this. It’s magnificent.”

IN DECEMBER 1962, on a terribly wintry night, Hazzard attended a party thrown by her friend Muriel Spark. By then Hazzard had quit work at the UN; *The New Yorker* had seen to it that her visa problem was solved, and, as a contracted writer for the magazine, she was making more money than she’d dreamed. Doors had opened, and Spark, in New York for a spell, wanted Hazzard to stop by her rooms at the Beaux Arts Hotel. Hazzard recalls, “‘More arts than beaux,’ Muriel used to say! But she told me, ‘You must come to this party because there you will meet the man whom you’ll marry.’”

Hazzard almost didn’t go because it was too snowy. When she arrived, W. H. Auden was just leaving. Hazzard had seen him on other occasions, at dinner parties, and recalls him as “always a stately affair, a bit like dining with a monument.” Muriel was in conversation with a Catholic priest. She had recently converted, and the priest was now a regular in her social retinue. Elsewhere Hazzard recognized a few more writers, a painter, a cartoonist. The tableau was daunting, and Spark’s comment about Hazzard meeting a man hardly made her feel at ease. Single, in her early thirties, gaining attention for her writing, she’d had enough of being told when and whom she should marry.

“But as I looked around,” Hazzard recalls, “somebody came to the open door, and here was this very tall man.” He was Francis Steegmuller, a childless widower and the author and translator of the canonical English version of *Madame Bovary*. Hazzard doesn’t remember what they talked about that night; but she lovingly recalls the second night, when he invited her to his apartment for a drink before both attended a dinner party given by William Maxwell and his wife, Emmy. Spark had taken a hand, encouraging Steegmuller that Hazzard might need him to accompany her. Steegmuller’s apartment was in a decade-old building spanning an entire block on the Upper East Side, a great white ship of a space enclosing the city’s largest private garden; Hazzard had walked by it many times. “It’s funny, I sometimes thought I would end up in there,” she says. “You had to notice it, because there was nothing around it but small brownstones and fire escape buildings. I don’t know, I just had a feeling it had something in store for me.” Steegmuller opened the door to his apartment, and across the room Hazzard recognized the painting over his mantle. “What a beautiful Redon,” she observed, and immediately feared she’d been impolite not to greet him. But Steegmuller adored

PHOTO COURTESY OF BLACKSTONE-SHELburnE



Publicity photo of Hazzard from the early 1960s.

what she'd said. At the end of the year, three days before Christmas, they were married. The bride wore a creamy light wool dress and a jacket lined in pink: "I have it still." Her family was not in attendance. Spark, however, was. She called their marriage "my best novel."

"I was just so happy," recalls Hazzard, who makes a point of expressing the gratitude for good fortune that forever eluded her mother. "Ecstatic. We worked from home, we did what we liked, we traveled and we lived abroad—so it worked out, really. I have to say that it worked out in the most marvelous way."

The newlyweds settled in a larger apartment in the same building, where there would be room for children. They shared a life at the center of a literary-cultural elite composed of writers and artists and general professionals, a circle

of great achievement and, in the corners, a bit of opulence. The couple cut quite a figure. "Shirley had this lovely flower of a face," says Mary Ellin Barrett, daughter of Irving Berlin and a writer who has been close to Hazzard for forty years. "And Francis was elegant in a wonderfully relaxed way. They were very much part of the kind of New York scene that means you partake of the best the city has to offer. Shirley's New York was a very particular one. First of all, there was hard work at the center. You worked on a magazine or you wrote books, you were a musician or a lawyer. You went to the theater, you went to the opera, you went to the movies, you read the books as they came out, you went to dinner in people's apartments, and in those days we still had a lot of friends who lived in houses. I don't know who lives in houses now. And you had conversation about all manner of things. It was stimulating and cozy both, if you can believe it."

In the role Hazzard assumed in her marriage, there was an aspect of safety. Steegmuller, Hazzard's friend Phyllis Levin explains, "really managed a great deal of the details of her life." Hazzard became, everywhere but in print, Mrs. Francis

Steegmuller, and that is how she is known today: to the doormen, the maître d's, the utilities. At six-foot-five, Steegmuller towered over her. Hazzard was content to slipstream him both socially and professionally. "He was a very tall, thin man, brilliant," recalls Hazzard's literary agent, Lynn Nesbit, "and he was very much in command in social situations. And Shirley was, and is, a very feminine woman. Always completely charming." In her first author photo, taken for *Cliffs of Fall*, Hazzard is pictured with a beguiling smile, her hands held fetchingly over an open book—of Steegmuller's. In 1966 she was the only woman among eight writers to receive a Kennan Literary Award. In the *New York Times* announcement of the prizes, the seven men were identified by their works—"Mr. Alfred, a teacher at Harvard University, is the author of *Hogan's Goat*, which is an Off Broadway success. Mr. Barth, a teacher at the State University of New York at Buffalo, is the author of 'The Sot-Weed Factor' and three other novels"—while Hazzard was pegged as follows: "Shirley Hazzard is the wife of the writer, Francis Steegmuller."

"It does seem as though I won the prize for marrying him," Hazzard says, but there's a smile in her voice. In a way, of course, she did; while it has been suggested that hers was the greater talent, being under his wing afforded her the privacy she needed to pursue her gift. After her marriage, her writing opened into full-length fiction: a set of short stories she submitted to *The New Yorker* struck her editor as more of a novel. Maxwell recalled, "What was being submitted, a chapter at a time, turned out to be *The Evening of the Holiday*—of romantic novels, surely one of the most beautiful. It has moments of piercing beauty, a style that is exemplary, and an appeal to both the mind and the feelings."

The Evening of the Holiday and Hazzard's second novel, *The Bay of Noon*, concern doomed romances that play out in Italy, where the culture redeems loss by celebrating it as a formal element of life. Hazzard describes the ur-narrative of the novels as "Northern girl meets meridional sensuality and charm." A young British woman stays for a period of time in Tuscany or Naples, places where human passion and melancholy imbue the architecture, art, and landscape. The cosmopolitan sensibilities of these narratives invited comparisons of Hazzard to Henry James. The formality of her prose and long rhythms of dramatic tension and release added to the association, but Hazzard's Northern girls do not experience the usual Jamesian moral conflicts. Rather, Hazzard's women have already suffered the loss of innocence and afterward never permit themselves dependence born of intimacy. Characters persist with affairs, or return home where nothing awaits, or project the initial crisis onto a new love so that the old injury is protected. In *The Evening of the Holiday*, grief assumes a certain grandeur:

It seemed to him that they were doing an obscure, outmoded thing in parting from each other. At one time partings were a recognized and tragic part of life . . . But nowadays—was it because one traveled more easily, or because one acted with less finality?—people did not part. On the contrary, contemporary tragedy seemed to be bound up with their staying together. In all the world, so it seemed to Tancredi, only he and she were compelled to part.

By all accounts a joyful newlywed, Hazzard preserved a precious sorrow in her work. Steegmuller, meanwhile, relished serving as her guardian and provider. He loved to adorn Hazzard in clothing and jewelry: a favorite necklace of three delicate seed-pearl strands, made to measure, sits perfectly on her. Steegmuller especially loved to give her coats. “Once we were walking in Florence,” she recalls. “And there was a red coat in a shop window—I had already cast an eye on it. Francis stopped me and he said, ‘Just a moment! One of your heroines has a red coat, and I don’t think you’ve ever had one. I think we should go in and try that on.’” The coat was reminiscent of one Hazzard had imagined for Caroline Bell in a pivotal scene of *The Transit of Venus*. Steegmuller bought it for her.

Hazzard describes the early years of her marriage as the happiest she ever knew. Steegmuller worked in his front study, she in her room at the back. Several times a day he would walk, manuscript pages in hand, past a few Picasso lithographs, a small Matisse, and two Piranesi prints of a church in Rome to knock on Hazzard’s study door. “I’d like to have her at my disposal all the time,” he once told an interviewer. “She has a marvelous sense of verbal equivalence for translations.” But Hazzard didn’t suffer interruptions gladly. At one point she affectionately hung out a sign:

Visiting Hours
4:00–5:00 a.m.

“Francis loved that I was a writer,” Hazzard says. “We never competed or quarreled. We never spoke vicious words to one another.” It was as if their work was both courtship and consummation. “There was a little piece in the paper just after we were married,” she explains, “which said that Francis had recently completed a work on Apollinaire and I had just finished *Cliffs of Fall*, and Francis said, ‘Look at this! It’s as if, to be respectable, we had to go and get married!’”

On the subject of the public reception of women’s writing, however, Hazzard is characteristically wry. Not long after Hazzard’s colleague and friend John Updike died, I mentioned that he wrote family dramas. “Yes,” replied Hazzard, “and it’s *Rabbit, Run*.”

And if a woman writes a family drama?

“They call it *The Rabbit Family*.”

Hazzard is private about her work and doesn't let anyone read it in manuscript—even Steegmuller saw nothing until first galleys. Hazzard writes in longhand and types up her revisions. Her studio contains boxes of drafts that sometimes sit for years before being upgraded to typed text. “I like that part of it,” she says. “I think, Yes, there it is, it exists. All I have to do is tweak its ears a little bit.” Typically, she composes in her mind, spending a fraction of her time at her desk. She's stubborn about getting it down right, and she won't hurry. She is paced by her muse rather than by the publishing industry, and she has never accepted a teaching post. “When I'm writing,” she told me, “I'm thinking really about nothing else. It's always present. It's pleasure, and at the same time there's a sort of dread, because only very rarely do the words you write come up to the level of what you want from them. Sometimes the word is waiting and you have to find it, and I love finding those words. Or I'll have a sense that a sentence could be better, and then, after a time, I find the way to make it better. What follows is a lovely feeling.”

Hazzard's sense of pleasure includes a decorum in storytelling. “It's important to have an engrossing story to tell and to be revelatory in a nonassertive way. In great books, the story is not told aggressively, you have to discover it; it unfolds itself.” Hazzard worked slowly, letting her novels come together in the midst of a life of dinner parties, travel, and other people's needs, and her level of attainment did not require competitive ambition. One imagines her formality as a breakwater against the force of her imagination, which was forever at high tide.

HAZZARD'S FICTION WRITING has coexisted with a public role she assumed as a critic of the United Nations. In a satirical novel, *People in Glass Houses* (1967), and later, in two forensically researched exposés, *Defeat of an Ideal: A Study of the Self-Destruction of the United Nations* (1973) and *Countenance of Truth: The United Nations and the Waldheim Case* (1990), Hazzard railed against the inefficiencies and inequalities of the organization. When her stories first appeared in *The New Yorker*—four stories in 1961 alone—Hazzard had been with the UN for almost a decade without advancement. “When I began to publish,” she recalls, “I had to ask permission. If you were writing about anything—hobgoblins—you were obliged to submit to official approval. They knew they were vulnerable, and to preserve their standing, they didn't want people going around telling the truth. After I began publishing my stories, my superior, a kind Belgian man, Edmund Jansen, said to me, ‘I'm going to make an appointment with the office of personnel, this is absurd.’ So we went there, and an Englishman named Coates, who was a panjandrum in

the office of personnel, listened to Edmund say, ‘The first thing would be that she should be put in the professional category of employment, and we should find an editorial role for her because she has this skill.’ I was listening to this, and I was very skeptical. And this character, Coates, leant back in his chair and said, ‘Talk about distant prospects.’ When we left his office, I said to Edmund, ‘Good-bye to all that.’ It was horrible, but it was only what we expected. But it was all, in a way, a little bit lucky.” Occupation might have become vocation: “If they had done even a little something, advanced me to the professional category, I might have stayed on—I would have felt encouraged.”

As she developed her fiction, war, like a rising bass line, came to a crescendo in the narratives. Hazzard stops just shy of writing battlefield scenes, but war shapes the backstory of every major character in her fiction from 1970 onward. And if war is the enemy, bureaucracy is its handmaiden. Bureaucracies—governments, military, the UN—are shown counter to civility, and bureaucrats and functionaries live at the expense of their humanity. Blindness and protocol, even more than aggression, lead to war and to deaths in the hundreds of thousands.

Among the outrages Hazzard details in her work are the establishment of an FBI office within UN Headquarters to track every American citizen working there, a clear violation of sovereignty and charter, and the Nazi background of Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, which he knowingly concealed from donor nations, which, in turn, looked the other way. Both breaches have since been accepted as part of the organization’s history.

Nevertheless, at the time Hazzard’s reviewers remarked on the character of the writer—and, more pointedly, of the woman—who dared make such comprehensive arguments. “She has marvelous looks, friends and beautiful objects around her,” the *New York Times* reported. “Yet there is something passionate and angry in Shirley Hazzard that she will not let go.” She was not disputed on facts but derided for picking on an institution of noble intention. Paradoxically, Hazzard’s argument and that of her detractors were the same: The human impulse to positive collaboration must be protected at all costs.

IN DECEMBER 2008, at the end of the very difficult year following her accident in Rome, Hazzard ventured out on a Saturday morning to give a talk at the Century Association in New York City. That morning it was sleeting hard, and the streets were iced and sloshing. But the room at the Century was packed by ten o’clock. With her elliptical stories and literary hoard, Hazzard delighted for the better part of an hour. Then she took questions, which were, as always, about *The Transit of Venus*.

Specifically, Hazzard was asked about Caroline Bell, the heroine. “Why does she have to die?”

Many readers have balked at that ending. “I finished the book angry and in tears,” wrote reviewer John Leonard. But Hazzard resists the characterization of her ending as unhappy. “They did find each other, you know?” she says. “They found each other before they parted. They could acknowledge their love. So that’s a happy ending.”

The inevitability of Caro’s death is central to the novel’s structure. The classical arc of the story is given in the opening pages:

What she had read had evidently made her impatient of the prime discrepancy—between man as he might be, and as he was. She would impose her crude belief—that there could be heroism, excellence—on herself and others, until they, or she, gave in. Exceptions could arise, rare and implausible, to suggest she might be right. To those exceptions she would give her whole devotion. It was apparently for them she was reserving her humility.

Her hubris signaled, Caro’s fate is sealed. She will make foolish mistakes. She falls for the cad and is excited by their illicit affair, believing herself singular in his heart. She is cast aside when she forces their lovemaking into the open, a transparency she seeks out of devotion not to the man, but to Truth.

Transit is a drama about ways of knowing. Characters’ revelations carry the dramatic weight of occurrences, moving the plot forward as surely as if a gun had gone off. The fact that Truth can be elusive is signaled by the book’s title: the transit of Venus is a rare astronomical phenomenon whereby Venus, passing in front of the sun, permits triangulation of the distances between Earth and other heavenly bodies. But the critical measurement of Venus’s passing is notoriously difficult to calculate. The heavens, in other words, are a tease. Thematically, a woman’s downfall in the pursuit of knowledge is an Old Testament tale, but Hazzard’s true gods are pagan: classical, fickle, distant, multivalent. And fantastically entertaining.

Destiny is a tricky piece of business for fiction writers, since omniscience feels like predetermination if it’s not handled well. Hazzard went through almost thirty drafts of *Transit*, achieving a tone of detachment and an effect of intimacy. Among Hazzard’s favorite phrases is one from Flaubert, who was the primary subject of Steegmuller’s life’s work and who was, as Hazzard has said, a “third party” to their marriage: “Poetry is more precise than geometry.” In its revelations of the human heart, *Transit* may fairly be called poetry.

IN 1982 HAZZARD was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. That same year, Steegmuller, already a member, was awarded the Academy’s Gold Medal

PHOTO BY EVAN CORNOG



Hazard and Steegmuller in Capri, Italy, 1977.

for distinguished achievement in biography. Their work had flourished. But twenty years of marriage had not given them a family.

“We wanted very much to have a child,” Hazard says. “And it was never understood quite why we couldn’t. We used to imagine how our lives would change. *Squallers*, as Francis used to call babies—if these squallers turn up, he’d say, what are we going to do with them? At one point we thought he would take an office across the road, and he rented a room to try it out. Immediately his typewriter was stolen. So he was back here in his workroom, and I in mine, and I’d come out about seven o’clock to make dinner and we would sit down here to eat and really, it couldn’t have been nicer. After a while, one day Francis said to me, ‘You

know, we are so happy together, and we’re having such a marvelous life. I don’t feel now that I want to change anything.’ I’ve never ceased to regret that we didn’t have children, but after that, we had such happiness, and I’m so glad I appreciated it then. We would say to each other, This life is going too quickly, and aren’t we so fortunate that we have each other? As the years passed, they weren’t beclouded by the absence of children at all.”

In their life together, the couple preserved a sense of play. Steegmuller’s unexpectedly lucrative translation of the French children’s tale “Le Hibou et La Poussiquette” brought a small windfall, and he and Hazard, living in Europe while Steegmuller researched his next book, purchased a Rolls-Royce in London. Back in New York, however, they found it too dicey to maneuver the car through their building’s parking garage, much less Manhattan’s streets, and the Rolls was sold. Of their collection of modern masters—Picasso, Pissarro, Manet, Braque, Villon, Redon—many of which still adorn the apartment, Steegmuller used to explain that he was not an art collector but simply had been lucky enough to be alive “when people who loved paintings could still afford to buy them.”

As Steegmuller aged, his needs grew, and Hazard increasingly set her work aside. “My husband was very seized with the idea of finishing two more books in his eighties,” she has said. “All the apparatus of marshaling the books involved a lot of

work, and he needed me more. He liked me to read things, and I did. He was losing his memory but he never lost his manners, his sweetness, his intelligence.”

Their favorite moments were spent on the terrace in Naples, where they took breakfast in a bower of bougainvillea overlooking Roman ruins in the Mediterranean Sea. They spent hours each morning reading aloud. “We would take on a big book,” Hazzard says, “Proust, or some nineteenth-century novel, or *War and Peace*, which is inexhaustively marvelous. We used to say to each other, if all copies of this book disappeared, we could re-create it—we would be able to remember.” In the afternoons, when Steegmuller would work or rest, Hazzard walked the city.

One day in October 1994, when Steegmuller, then eighty-eight, felt some shortness of breath, neither he nor Hazzard thought death was near. But they sought care at the hospital where they’d once been after Steegmuller’s accident. Friends came to visit, and as one was leaving, Francis said to her, “Remember how I love you.” Recalls Hazzard, “And that was when I thought—*oh*.” Steegmuller died that evening, with Hazzard by his side. “The thing is,” she says now, “that he was such a part of my life that it’s almost as if I—well, I can’t say that I died with him, but it’s not as if we were two quite separate beings.”

FOR SOME TIME now, Hazzard has been working on a novel inspired by an inscription on a Roman wall and a couple who happens across it. Among her friends it is rumored that part of the story takes place in New York City in the 1950s; others have heard about parts set in Italy. Hazzard will say no more.

Fifteen years after his death, Steegmuller still blesses Hazzard’s work. “Francis and I used to work in the morning,” she explains, “and then we’d go to lunch and dinner and see friends, and sometimes, toward the end of the day, I would go back again.” In those days she wrote only at her desk, facing a blank wall. “I don’t do much of that now. What I do do now is get into my bed with my pen or pencil and pages that I have already drafted and I snuggle down and just fix it up.” Imagination carries into sleep. “I’ve been having these wonderful dreams. I dream about people I know very well—I am conversing with them. It’s been a comfort to me, but it’s strange. It’s almost like—an afterlife. I’m enjoying being there. And sometimes when I wake up I write down just a few words. I’ve never had this before.” Is Francis among her dream subjects? “Of course. It’s the most natural thing in the world. It’s uncanny because it’s not like the same dream over and over again; rather, it’s a sequence of time, of days, as though he were alive. In a way it’s almost unbearable, but in another way, it’s lovely. There is something almost supernatural about having conversation again with somebody you’ve been thinking about.”

The illusions stop at daylight. When asked if she believes in the afterlife, she gives a rueful smile and shakes her head. “I don’t think you can choose to believe something just because it makes you feel better,” she says.

It is a late winter night, February, stony cold. The city is tired, and the sidewalks are dull with ice. A tricky evening for a woman with a hip replacement, but Hazzard has plans for supper at one of her locals, a French bistro a few blocks north. Construction hours having ended, the apartment is quiet. The Picassos are dim beneath a blown bulb in the hallway. She switches on the lamp on Steegmuller’s writing desk to illuminate a small painting by her Italian friend Elena Vivante. “This is the view from my room at the villa,” she says, indicating the sunflower fields, the cypress trees; it’s the view from the room where she wrote “Harold,” her first story.

Hazzard looks lovely; a cloche covers her auburn hair, swept cleanly back, and her eyes are the same violet of her earrings and brooch, a suite from Steegmuller. She considers, and then from the closet pulls the red coat. **N**

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