

Susan
Sellers

Given
The
Choice



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For Margaret Whitford
1947-2011

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networking

Two black rectangles dominated the canvas. In between were swirling wisps of grey paint, like breath on an icy morning. Jean-Claude's new work had lost focus, Marion saw, stepping back from his easel. The rectangles were even more oppressive from a distance. She concentrated on the grey in the hope this might soften the effect. She understood the wisps were intended to link the two rectangles but their amorphousness caused too strong a contrast. It was like looking at two different pictures.

The state of Jean-Claude's room told her he had not spent the weekend working. His trestle table had been cleared of paints and brushes and turned into an impromptu bar. The air stank of stale cigarettes and a few forlorn strands of tinsel dangled from the light. There were bottles and cans everywhere.

Marion heard footsteps behind her.

'I pressed the buzzer but thought you must be in the shower. I let myself in.'

Jean-Claude uncovered a pack of cigarettes from the debris on the table, took one out and put it to his lips. Marion waited while he rummaged for a lighter. 'I phoned last night but couldn't get an answer.'

There was a brief flare as the cigarette was lit.

'Did we have a meeting planned for today?'

'No, that's why I called. We need to discuss your show. The gallery wants to know how many extra people you've invited in addition to those on the guest list.'

Jean-Claude shrugged.

‘Ten, twenty, I don’t remember. They won’t all come. I haven’t checked my messages for a few days.’

‘So I see.’ Marion gazed about her. ‘Looks like it was quite a party.’ She held up her hand to forestall his protest. ‘Don’t worry, I’m not staying long. I’ve a board meeting at the Trust at two, then a showcase concert at seven. If I tell Taylors you’ve invited ten personal guests would that be about right?’

As if considering this Jean-Claude smoked in silence, a grey fog forming round him. Marion wondered if this had been the inspiration for the fog in his picture.

‘Why do they need to know?’

‘It’s a small space. There are fire regulations. We can’t have more than a hundred people in the gallery at once. It will make a difference to the catering too. I need to know who’s coming so I can make sure we don’t waste an invitation.’

The tip of Jean-Claude’s cigarette had burned to ash. Marion hunted amongst the dirty glasses for an ashtray.

‘Actually that’s not why I came. We should talk about your speech. You know I’m away over Christmas.’ She located an ashtray and set it on the table beside him. Jean-Claude stared at her, runnels of smoke pouring from his nostrils.

‘I have nothing to say. It’s all in the paintings.’

‘I know that,’ Marion interrupted. ‘Try not to take it so seriously! Think of it as a game, a hoop you have to jump through.’ She opened her bag and pulled out a sheaf of papers. ‘Here, I’ve jotted down some ideas to help you. I thought you could describe how you use colour: what it means to you, why it’s important. It won’t take long.’

‘No.’

‘What do you mean, “no”?’

‘It will sound stupid.’

‘It’s not a choice!’ Marion struggled to quell her exasperation. ‘You invite people to an opening, give them a glass of wine, and the artist says a few words. It’s what happens. The critics will be there for heaven’s sake! They’ll have my press release but they’ll want to hear something from you. Look,’ she proposed, ‘why not draft something out and bring it to the concert this evening. I can read it in the interval. If you like, I’ll come back in the morning and we can go through it together.’

‘No.’ Jean-Claude stuck his cigarette in his mouth and walked to the window.

‘Will you at least think about it? You know how much work has gone into this show. If all goes as it should, by the time it’s over you’ll be launched as a rising new star. This is not the moment to sabotage arrangements.’ She stopped. Jean-Claude was staring into the yard. She was not even sure he was listening. She put the papers in a space on the table and closed her bag.

‘Why don’t I leave you my ideas and a ticket for the concert just in case?’ She wedged a ticket and five £20 notes under a whisky bottle. ‘Hope to see you later. If not, I’ll ring in the morning.’

As she left, Marion stole a last glance at the canvas on his easel. It was even less convincing from this angle. She was beginning to regret encouraging Jean-Claude to rein in his use of colour to see if a more restricted palette might simplify his ideas. If this painting was anything to go by, the experiment was a disaster.

* * *

Marion hung the last of the ‘reserve’ signs on the seats in the front row, then removed her scarf and draped it across two of the places. From here, she gauged, noting the position of the piano and music stands, they would have an excellent view. She decided to wait for Edward in the still-empty auditorium, rather than fight her way through the crush of people now gathering in the foyer. It had been a long afternoon. The board had met for over three hours, and although they had agreed a shortlist of young artists to sponsor there had been difficult choices. There were always far more deserving cases than the Trust had funding for.

The doors at the back of the auditorium opened. Interested in audiences, Marion watched two women find their seats. She opened her bag and took out a programme. She seemed to recall the pianist was Estonian, a scholarship holder at the Royal Academy. Jacob Hindley, the composer on the Trust, had been impressed by his playing, comparing him to the great Alfred Brendel. She was studying the list of pieces when Edward came into view.

‘Am I late?’ he asked, stooping to kiss her. He was a tall, powerfully built man with the physique of a former rugby player, though he had loathed the game at school. ‘The traffic was terrible. Even the taxi couldn’t cut through.’

‘No, they’ve only just opened the doors.’

‘Good day?’

‘Jean-Claude was still in bed when I arrived. He was hung-over so it seemed pointless trying to discuss anything. I’ve no idea where he’s got to with his speech.’

‘Mrs Richmond? It’s wonderful to put a face to a name at last!’ A short, balding man in a dark suit came towards them, his right arm extended in anticipation of a handshake. It made him look as if he held an invisible dog on a lead.

‘I’m Richard Graves. We’ve spoken on the phone. This is a terrific opportunity for our students.’

Marion shook the tendered hand.

‘Delighted to meet you,’ she assured him. ‘Did you get my invitation? We’ve organised a small party afterwards for the sponsors. In the Green Room. I was hoping you’d bring the musicians along. There’ll be champagne and canapés.’

A bell signalling the imminent start of the concert interrupted her. Excusing himself, Richard Graves hurried backstage. Marion led Edward towards the seats she had cordoned with her scarf. The rest of the front row was now full and Marion greeted several people as they took their places.

The lights in the auditorium dimmed and a ripple ran through the audience. There was a burst of applause as the musicians came onto the stage. Marion watched the pianist adjust his stool then settle his fingers over the keys, as if his hands were finding those of an old friend. She felt eager to hear him play. The string players lifted their bows.

The music reminded her of galloping on horseback, heart pounding, blood drumming in her ears, fields vanishing in a blur. Fragments of her conversation with Jean-Claude from earlier that morning crowded into her brain. She was at a loss to understand why giving a speech was such an obstacle. He knew perfectly well it was the protocol for these events. She reminded herself she could do nothing about it now and forced herself to concentrate on the music. No matter how many concerts she attended, she found it hard to stop her mind from wandering. She glanced at Edward and saw he was following every detail of the piece. She wished she could do the same. Give her a painting or a sculpture and she understood exactly how to approach it. A degree in art history and nearly two decades in the business had given her this skill. Yet when it came to music, she was a novice. She responded to the Rachmaninoff as if it provided a tumultuous accompaniment to her own thoughts.

Suddenly it was the interval. People were clapping. Marion whispered in Edward's ear.

'I need to check arrangements at the bar. Will you stay behind and escort the sponsors?'

She followed the general exodus upstairs where glasses of complimentary wine had been set out on tables. The staff had done exactly as she had asked. She noticed a woman with red hair whose face was familiar. It was Bérénice, one of Jean-Claude's friends. She wondered if this meant Jean-Claude had finished his speech and was at the concert. Then she remembered she had only left one ticket. Since Bérénice was still at art college she thought it unlikely she had paid for her seat, despite a substantial reduction for students. Perhaps Jean-Claude was spending the evening working on his speech and had given the place to Bérénice rather than waste it. She found her mobile and checked to see if he had sent her a message. Then she went onto the balcony overlooking the foyer and pressed his number.

'Jean-Claude? I'm ringing during the interval. I've just seen Bérénice.'

'Marion? Yes, she's interested in music so I gave her the ticket.'

'How's the speech going? Shall I come over in the morning? Help you rehearse?'

The line crackled and went dead. Marion stared at her phone and was about to call again, when she saw Edward coming towards her, a glass of wine in each hand.

'Problems?'

'I was trying to ring Jean-Claude.' She put her phone away and took a glass. 'Thanks, I could do with this. Though I should be talking to the sponsors.'

'Don't worry, Richard Graves is with them. You'll have plenty of time to network later.'

* * *

The pianist's long, slender fingers were exquisite. Marion watched them glide over the keys, as swift and agile as the swallows that had roosted in her parents' barn in summer, which she sent shooting into the air with a clap of her hands. She compared them to Jean-Claude's fingers, paint-stained and hardened by solvents, a rim of dirt beneath each nail. The music stopped abruptly. For a moment no one moved. Then someone stretched, coughed,

whispered a remark to a neighbour. The string players turned the pages of their scores, one of the violinists adjusted her bow. Finally the pianist nodded and the music started again.

Ah, this was the slow movement. Marion settled herself in her seat and focussed on the rich sonorities of the cello. What a sweet, clear sound the piano made as it took up the cello's melody. She had played the slow movement from Ravel's piano concerto to Edward the first time they made love. They had met in Michael's gallery. She knew instantly that none of the pictures on display would interest him and showed him some watercolours Michael had picked up at auction. As luck would have it, she was on her own, and when Edward decided to buy one she poured two glasses of the champagne Michael reserved for his most valued clients. It required ingenuity to invent a reason for Edward to return to the gallery. In the end, she told him she needed Michael's permission to sell the watercolours and asked him to call again the following Friday. The choice of day was deliberate. Michael was at an opening in Liverpool and she would once again be on her own. That evening after work she went shopping, opting for a sleeveless linen dress cut just below the knee.

She had judged it perfectly. When Edward returned on Friday she saw his eyes fasten on her bare arms. She insisted on laying all the watercolours out again in case he should change his mind. By the time she had written out his receipt and wrapped his picture in layers of ivory tissue paper, Tomas, Michael's trainee, responding to her text had arrived. She could invite Edward to lunch.

Conscious of movement around her, she joined in the applause. Pamela Hirschell, the Trust's director, came onto the stage and presented the pianist with flowers. She had on the tartan suit she habitually wore to concerts. It had often surprised Marion since how certain she was Edward would agree to accompany her to lunch that day. Though he was older, and clearly wealthy, something in the shy way he listened as she talked about the watercolours gave her confidence.

Pamela was shaking the string players by the hand, her reading glasses suspended from a gold chain. The clapping grew louder. The pianist looked out over his audience with a slightly startled expression, as if he were returning slowly from another world. He ran his fingers through his hair and Marion was once again struck by the bird-like swoop of his hands. His features were fine too, she observed; with his dark hair and wire-framed glasses he

reminded her of the young Mahler. He beckoned to the first violinist, who came forward and took his bow. The second violinist joined him, followed by the viola player and cellist. Finally the string players stepped back so the pianist was centre stage once more. The applause gained in momentum. Several people around her shouted 'bravo'. Marion had the feeling she had had once at school when one of her drawings unexpectedly won a prize. Her picture had been held up for display and looked so unfamiliar in the hands of the headmistress she wondered if there had been a mistake. She had walked towards the podium not entirely sure if the applause was for her or for someone else.

Upstairs in the Green Room, she made a point of saying a personal thank you to each of the sponsors. She spoke to the string players and noted their contact details. She never knew when she might have an opening for talented young musicians. She wanted to congratulate the pianist and when she saw the throng of people round him clear a little, seized her chance.

The pianist listened politely as Marion complimented him on his performance. She realised she was voicing platitudes he must have heard a hundred times before. She found a card and introduced herself as one of the fund-raisers for the concert. Her words had the desired effect. Immediately, she had his full attention. He was very grateful for the opportunity, he told her, and would be glad to play in any future concerts she planned. Marion added his phone number to the list on her programme.

home is where the heart is

The house looked smaller than Marion remembered. It was a sensation she had each time she returned home, as if her childhood dwelling and the building before her were constructed on a different scale. She walked up the gravel path and round the side of the house. To her left was a large paddock; straight ahead the square of garden where her father grew vegetables. Beyond was a row of stables overlooking fields. The land was all that remained of the family farm her parents had sold to fund their riding school.

‘Here you are at last!’ her father beamed as she pushed open the kitchen door. He stood up and put both arms round his daughter. Edward appeared carrying a box, on top of which balanced a bouquet wrapped in red and green cellophane and tied with a silver bow. Marion’s eldest brother, Joe, came to his rescue.

‘Help the man in,’ Joe instructed his two sons lounging on one of the benches round the table. When neither boy moved their mother, Sara, prodded them.

‘You heard your father.’

Zac, whose unnaturally white skin was accentuated by dark rings drawn round his eyes, got to his feet. He wore a leather choker studded with metal spikes and his hair was so stiffly gelled it appeared frozen. Marion stifled her joke about his collar making him look like a prize dog. Zac passed the flowers to his brother and took the box from Edward. It rattled as he set it on the table. Recognising the sound, both boys grinned.

‘Perhaps someone would like to put a few bottles in the fridge,’ Edward suggested. ‘There’s lager in the car too.’

‘Very generous of you.’ Marion’s father shook his son-in-law’s hand.

‘Edward, how lovely to see you!’ Marion’s mother came in through the door at the far end of the kitchen. To her daughter’s surprise, she was wearing lipstick, and had swapped her customary jodhpurs and fleece for a grey skirt and turquoise jumper. Edward presented the bouquet and Marion had to admit that despite reminding him her mother hated anything to do with what she called ‘prettifying the house’, the flowers were a success. Her mother blushed and clutched at her son-in-law’s arm. If Marion had not known her better, she might almost have described her behaviour as flirtatious.

‘Really,’ her mother was saying, ‘so many presents.’

‘They’re all Marion’s doing,’ Edward informed her. ‘She’s been shopping for weeks. You should see the car.’

‘Let him catch his breath,’ Marion’s father interrupted. ‘It’s a long drive.’ He pulled out a chair.

‘Do you have a sat nav?’ Jordan wanted to know. He was almost as tall as Zac, with a flop of sand-coloured hair and teeth barricaded by braces. Marion hung her coat on the stand by the door and looked about her. The kitchen had changed little since her schooldays. There was a stainless steel sink under the window but otherwise everything was the same. The sink was full of unwashed plates and there were more dirty plates on the counter next to it. Marion’s gaze travelled to the stove, where food spills had burned and blackened over time, so its entire surface appeared encrusted in striations of some interesting geological deposit. She resisted the temptation to harangue her mother over the perils of salmonella and E.coli and turned her attention back to the table.

‘There’s a space here,’ her father encouraged, shuffling along on his bench. He was wearing the same dark blue jumper as on her previous visit, with the addition of a paisley neckerchief she had sent for his birthday. Her mother, who had been laughing at a story about the pitfalls of satellite navigation, suddenly pounced.

‘You still have your jacket on.’

Marion watched her mother’s features harden into their familiar expression of disgruntlement. She glanced down at her jacket, a beautiful embroidered creation from a designer in the King’s Road. She had been on the point of taking her jacket off but her mother’s remark made her change her mind. Before she could school herself to see how pathetic this attempt at defiance

was, her brother Paul, the youngest of her family, came in through the far door, cradling his new baby. His wife of a few months, Stella, followed.

‘Sis,’ Paul called as he saw her, ‘you made it.’ Stella stepped out from behind Paul and gave Marion a kiss.

‘Sorry we weren’t here when you arrived. We had to change him. Again.’ Marion wondered if her sister-in-law realised she had tell-tale damp patches shadowing each of her breasts.

‘You must be so busy trying to do everything.’

Paul snorted, handing the baby to their mother as he gave Marion a hug.

‘Busy doesn’t begin to describe it. We haven’t had a decent night’s sleep in weeks. Can’t you see the bags under our eyes?’

‘My eyes, you mean,’ Stella protested. She gathered stray strands of blonde hair and fastened them in a clip. ‘Since when have you been getting up to do the feeds?’

‘Well I can’t, can I?’ Paul retorted, winking at his sister. ‘Though I did make you a cup of tea the other night.’

Stella raised a quizzical eyebrow.

‘Once. He did it once.’

Marion tried to think of something witty to say but was pre-empted by her mother.

‘Say hello to your auntie.’

Before she had time to prepare herself, Marion felt the weight of her newest nephew being placed in her arms. He was so tightly cocooned in his blanket that only his face showed. She peered down at his features. They were all perfectly formed, yet somehow indistinct, like a carving the sculptor is still working on. She studied the dark shock of hair and sleeping eyelids, feeling, as she always did on such occasions, an overwhelming sense of relief the infant was not hers. As if sensing her ambivalence, her nephew fidgeted. She shushed him, but this only seemed to irritate him. He began to cry, quietly at first, then more persistently, as if determined to expose her shortcomings.

‘Congratulations,’ she hazarded. ‘Have you decided on a name yet?’

‘Don’t hold him like that,’ her mother swooped down on her again, this time taking one of her hands and cradling it round the baby. ‘He’s not one of your precious art works.’ Marion ignored the spurt of indignation this remark triggered and attempted to follow her instructions.

‘Probably wind,’ her mother pronounced. ‘You need to support him and

rub his back. Like this.' Marion allowed her nephew to be repositioned against her shoulder and tried not to worry about her silk jacket.

'Here, let me say hello.' Marion was suddenly aware of Edward standing next to her. He took the baby from her and settled him in the crook of his arm. Then, very gently, he began rocking him from side to side, gradually increasing the sweep of his movement so that within a few moments the crying ceased.

'There, you just need to go back to sleep.' He smiled at Stella. 'He's gorgeous.'

Marion's mother burst out.

'Why, you're a natural Edward! I've always said older men make better fathers. Did you see that?' She turned in triumph to her daughter. 'High time the pair of you got on with it! You've been married six years. And it's your fortieth in September.'

'Mum....' Before Marion could voice her objection, Edward intervened.

'And my fiftieth, Mrs T.'

'You don't look a day over forty-five,' Marion's mother reassured him. Jordan whistled.

'Wow, that means you'll be ninety between you. You'll need a giant cake.'

'So we will,' Edward agreed. 'And someone to help us eat it.'

Before Jordan could demonstrate his suitability for this task, Marion's father called the family to order.

'Well, now. Can I have your attention? Tom, Annie and crew won't be here until lunchtime tomorrow, but I propose we open something festive now.'

Fridge and cupboard doors banged; glasses, bottles of lager, lemonade for younger family members, a corkscrew for Edward's wine, were found and distributed. Then Marion's father rapped on the table again.

'Merry Christmas! It's wonderful to have you all here!'

* * *

Marion leant her elbows on the paddock fence and gazed into the darkness.

'There you are, I've been looking for you.'

She turned to find Edward, who put his arms round her. She buried her face in his chest.

'You OK?'

‘Yes.’ She spoke into the tweed of his jacket. ‘I just needed to get some air.’

‘It does get hot, with all of us crammed in the kitchen.’

Marion breathed in the familiar smell of Edward’s after-shave. It was one of the things she had first noticed about him, the day he had appeared in Michael’s gallery, his fresh, clean scent tinged with a hint of the expensive and exotic, like lemons spiced with myrrh. It was an unusual choice for a man who appeared so reserved. She lifted her head.

‘Regretting your decision to spend Christmas here?’

‘No. It’s nice to see everyone. And I think it means a lot to your parents to have you here. Your father told me several times how glad he was we could come.’

‘Dear old Dad.’ She paused. ‘I bet Mum didn’t say she was pleased to see me.’

‘She seemed very keen for you to hold the new baby.’

Marion pulled away. It was pointless trying to explain how her mother’s efforts to bully her into reproduction made her feel. She looked towards the lit stable block. ‘It’s strange coming back,’ she confided. ‘As if part of me is ten years old again.’

‘Is that so bad?’

Marion felt his arm encircle her shoulder.

‘I was always so restless as a child. One day I would dream of becoming a great rider. Winning all the competitions. The next I wanted to be something completely different.’

‘Like what?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. A famous artist.’

‘It’s not too late.’

Marion laughed.

‘I might be good at spotting talent but I’m no artist – as you perfectly well know. Besides, I’m happy with my life.’ She found Edward’s hand. ‘Come on, let’s go back inside. They’ll be wondering where we are.’

* * *

‘So what is it you do?’ Jordan asked his question as if he were practising to become a professional interviewer.

Edward shifted his position so he could address him directly.

'I'm an accountant. I help people in different companies figure out how to make their businesses more profitable.'

Jordan grimaced.

'Sounds like maths. Is Aunt Marion an accountant too?'

'Jordan,' his mother protested. 'Just ignore him,' she advised. 'They had a career officer visit his school last week and he's been grilling people about their jobs ever since.' Sara sat back, her face flushed. She was a supervisor at a local call centre and had once confided to Marion she found it easier disciplining her children on their mobiles.

'Has it helped you decide what you want to be?' Edward wondered.

'Your uncle makes a great deal of money,' Marion's mother butted in.

Jordan considered this.

'How much money?'

'That's enough,' Sara reprimanded. 'You mustn't ask people such personal questions.' Sensing he could advance no further with Edward, Jordan swivelled round to face Marion.

'So what do you do?'

'I work with artists.'

'Your aunt's something of an Impresario – she makes things happen!' Edward illustrated his words with a wave of an imaginary wand. 'She also sits on several grant-awarding boards,' he added, as if suddenly worried Marion might not wish him to give her family such a cavalier impression. 'She distributes money to deserving causes.'

'For which she doesn't earn a penny,' Marion's mother interposed. She looked at her daughter. 'I thought you were going to start your own gallery.'

'I was,' Marion explained. 'I still might. But it's easy enough to secure exhibition space when I want it.'

'I've never understood how this makes you any money,' her mother grumbled. Paul raised his eyebrows in a 'here we go again' gesture that made Jordan giggle. 'You'd be amazed how much art can sell for,' Marion observed.

'I always thought you'd become a painter,' her father, who was ruffling Jordan's hair, reflected. 'When your aunt was your age she was always drawing. She was very good at it.'

Edward leaned forward.

'The trouble is, talent is only part of it. If you're going to succeed you need people behind you, organising sponsorship, promoting your work.'

Marion's brilliant at that.'

'So is she her own boss?' Jordan piped up.

'She is.'

Marion had the impression the general hubbub round the table hushed a little as Edward spoke. She could not help the swell of pride that accompanied his words. She was the only one of her siblings to have done something different with her life. Joe and Paul both worked for her father; even Tom, who had set up on his own, relied heavily on the family business.

'There's more to it than you might imagine,' she told them, pleased at this opportunity to give her family an insight into her life. 'Tastes are fickle. It can be hard to predict what will sell. It might be political graffiti one minute, aboriginal bark-carving the next. When it comes to distributing public funds I have to judge not only how an artist will develop, but if their work will catch the zeitgeist.'

'That means the mood of the moment,' Edward interpreted for Jordan.

'It's all a lot of nonsense.' Marion's mother had taken the baby back from Edward and was dandling him on her knee. 'There was that piece in the paper. Someone froze a dead horse and it went on display in London. A scientist did the freezing – all the artist had to do was come up with the idea.' She shifted the baby onto her shoulder. 'Exploitation I call it. The artist made thousands.' She eyed her daughter. 'I still don't understand why you gave up managing that gallery in Muswell Hill. Or why you stopped working for Michael. You could have taken maternity leave.'

Marion glared at her mother, trying to decide if the provocation was intentional.

'I wouldn't mind running my own company,' Sara ventured in a fresh attempt to change tack. 'My boss is a lazy sod. I don't know why head office keeps him on. He spends half his day discussing football.'

'Oh yes? And what about all those text messages you find time to send me?' Joe appealed to the table. 'Put the washing on. Don't forget to take the meat out of the freezer. Can you pick the kids up? It's a wonder I get anything done.'

'It's because you're close to home....'

'The fact the stables are nearby doesn't mean I can pop back every ten minutes to do all the things you've forgotten.'

'Don't rise to the bait,' Stella warned her sister-in-law.

'Your father's his own boss,' Marion's mother reminded them.

'Don't we know it!' Joe quipped back.

'But what does your business actually do?' Jordan persisted.

'I organise events for people; when I can I curate exhibitions. More recently, I've become interested in helping younger artists.'

'Is there someone you're promoting at the moment?' Stella queried.

'Yes.' Marion ignored her mother's tutting. 'His name's Jean-Claude Rainier. In fact, he's having his first show right after Christmas.'

This interested Jordan.

'What kind of show?'

'Paintings.'

Her nephew pulled a face.

'You mean like the National Gallery. We went there with school... the best part was afterwards because we were allowed to go and photograph each other by the fountains under Nelson's Column.'

Marion laughed.

'Not quite. Taylors is a commercial gallery. People look at the paintings and then buy them if they want to.'

'So you make a lot of money too.'

'Jordan!' This time it was his father who erupted. 'How many more times! You mustn't ask people how much they earn.'

'I've only had my own business two years. You don't expect to make a profit at first. Before that I ran a gallery, and before that I worked for a man called Michael.'

'Will you make money soon?'

Marion shook her head, in the hope of indicating to her nephew she had said all she had to say on the subject. She sensed her family had lost interest. Her mother was quizzing Stella about breastfeeding; Paul told his father about a horse he had seen for sale at another stable. Zac plugged himself into his iPod, head wagging to the beat. Sara stood up and cleared the dirty plates from the table, assisted by a reluctant Joe. Marion looked at Edward, listening to Jordan recount his exploits climbing the lions in Trafalgar Square. He had hardly touched his wine. She wondered if he were calculating, as she was, when they could make their escape. She had arranged for the hotel she had booked them into for the holiday to deliver champagne to their room the moment they arrived. Fortunately, her father would not encourage them to stay. He would want time to set out sherry and mince pies for a Father Christmas he still insisted on invoking, even

though Zac and Jordan were too old to believe and his newest grandson too young. She thought of him hanging the stockings he had packed with his gifts over the fireplace; stamping reindeer prints in the soft mud by the kitchen door. Her parents were early risers and disliked late nights. With luck, she and Edward could slip away before nine.

show time

Marion clicked the light above the dressing-table mirror and scrutinised her face. Her nose was her best feature, slender and straight. She smoothed foundation into her skin, drew a line round her mouth and coloured her lips. She always felt her eyes were too close together and she tackled these last. As she worked, she ran through a checklist of arrangements for the opening in her head. She had spoken to Jean-Claude at the gallery that morning while he was putting the final touches to his installation. The car was booked and the caterers were on their way. Her catalogues, price lists and press releases were in a box by the door.

'You look beautiful,' Edward padded in from the bathroom as she was applying mascara. His hair was wet and he had a towel wrapped round his middle.

Marion surveyed his reflection as he came towards her.

'I'm not dressed yet.'

'Exactly!' Edward put his hands on her bare shoulders and kissed the nape of her neck. She pushed him away.

'You'll make us late! We need to be there by four. I want to check everything is as it should be before the guests start arriving.'

Edward went towards the wardrobe. Marion swivelled round on her stool to see which suit he would pick, approving as he took a navy wool and cashmere from its hanger. They had bought it together the previous autumn, Edward standing patiently as she held swatches of fabric against him. He had not even protested when she suggested a new cut of jacket to disguise his increasing waistline. She got up and rifled along his rack of ties.

‘Here, try this,’ she pulled one out embossed with his old school crest. ‘I think you need an air of exclusivity about you tonight. I want you to help me persuade your City friends that buying Jean-Claude Rainier is a sound investment. Don’t worry, I’ll do all the hard-sell.’ She looped the tie over his head. ‘Your role is to add credibility. And hand out catalogues.’

Back at her dressing table, Marion pulled the dryer from its bracket on the wall. As she blew the hot air through her hair she followed Edward’s progress in the mirror. It amazed her how quickly he dressed. One moment he was sliding his feet into trouser-legs, the next he was buttoning his shirt and clipping on cufflinks. She glanced at her jewellery box and wondered what to wear. Her dress, which was hanging on the wardrobe door, was black with a frieze of beads at the hem and neck. Edward had given her the jewellery box as a wedding present and each year, for her birthday, he added to its collection. She switched the dryer off and sifted through its contents. A glint of emeralds drew her attention. She fished the bracelet out and held it to the light. It contrasted perfectly with her dress and she hunted for matching earrings. This, she reflected, as she sorted through several pairs, was the kind of detail Jean-Claude pretended was unimportant. Yet she knew from experience that appearances mattered, particularly when it came to selling. It was all about conveying the right impression. These days no one went to an opening simply to buy a picture, they went to find out about the painter. They wanted reassurance that their purchase had been made by someone with cachet. The most successful artists understood this. Shona Creech wore Clara Sommersmith to her openings and parties; Christian Knight leaked carefully choreographed photographs of himself with television stars to the Press.

Marion squeezed gel from a tube and raked it through her hair with her fingers. She was pinning a good deal on Jean-Claude’s speech. He was intelligent, and he had controversial ideas about art. Besides, he had a French accent and this would distinguish him from all the ‘Young British Artist’ wannabes still swamping the London scene. After a decade of indifference, Marion detected the inklings of a renewed interest in Europe, and she hoped to profit from this shift. It was important Jean-Claude spoke well. The day after the concert she had spent three hours working with him, until between them they had a first-rate script. Though Jean-Claude had continued to protest that an artist talking about their work was nonsensical, she had reminded him people would expect it. It would look rude if he remained

silent at his opening, like hosting a party and refusing to greet his guests.

'The car's here,' Edward's voice called up the stairs. Marion dabbed perfume on her wrists, took her dress from its hanger and pulled it over her head. She slipped feet into shoes and picked up her coat and bag. Then she stood in front of the mirror and gave her appearance a final check.

'Ready,' she shouted back.

* * *

The impression as she went into the gallery was dazzling. Spotlights picked out violet clouds in a fuchsia sky or bars of gold on a cerulean sea. Marion said hello to the caterers arranging canapés on silver trays and went in search of the manager. She found him upstairs.

'Hi,' he greeted her, 'all set?' He wore brown leather trousers and a bottle green polo neck with what looked like a Rolex watch.

'I think so.' Marion shook his hand. 'Is Jean-Claude here?'

'He was until lunchtime, then he headed off to the pub. Said he was meeting some friends. The work he's done on the lighting has really paid off.'

A sound drew their attention. Marion peered over the rail to see Edward manoeuvring through the doorway, a box in his arms.

'Would you mind if we moved a table near the door? I'd like to lay out the catalogues and price lists so people can pick them up as they come in.'

'Not at all. And let me know if there's anything else you need. I'll be on hand all evening.'

Leaving Edward to organise the table, Marion walked slowly round the gallery. Though she knew each of Jean-Claude's paintings intimately, she wanted to get a sense of them together. After all, this might be her last opportunity to view them as a collection. Tonight and in the coming weeks, she hoped to sell them to buyers who would display them in a range of venues. Most of the canvases she expected to remain in London, adorning the walls of businesses and private homes. Some would go to different parts of the UK, and if she was successful a few might even make their way abroad. Only when Jean-Claude had become sufficiently famous to warrant a retrospective would they reappear as a group. She stopped in front of one of the first paintings she had watched him complete. Bands of blue dissolved into each other, beginning with pale sapphire and culminating

in deep cobalt. Where the bands overlapped, flecks of yellow and orange starred the paint, as if buried there.

One of the many compelling qualities of Jean-Claude's work was that it was instantly recognisable. For someone still only in his early thirties, he already had a distinctive style. Although self-taught, he had enough skill to satisfy the old school: he was technically accomplished, and while most of his work was abstract it evoked perceptible objects. At the same time, it was bold enough to convince those who believed contemporary art was interesting only when it broke rules. She sensed that in Jean-Claude she had found that rare hybrid: a painter who appealed to traditionalists and to those who wanted art to shock.

She went on to the next picture: pools of cadmium and scarlet that might have been flowers except the red was too fierce. It had been the colour in Jean-Claude's work that had first caught her eye. He had come in search of Michael one lunchtime, and though she gave her standard reply that the gallery already had a number of artists it was promoting, he insisted on leaving his folder. She promised to show it to Michael but instead of taking this as his cue to leave, Jean-Claude settled on the sofa. At first, she ignored him. Yet as the minutes ticked past his presence distracted her. She took the folder down to the basement and opened it. The first picture she considered was a line of green against a mulberry and crimson backdrop. The colours leaped out at her. It was a landscape, she realised, as she studied the painting more closely, a single field against the rising sun. Marion leafed through the rest of the folder and still the colours drew her. The effect was hypnotic, as if the paint itself was alive. She closed the folder and went back upstairs and tried to concentrate on her sales report. Jean-Claude continued to stare into the space in front of him. Marion found herself darting discrete glances at his black jeans and jacket, wondering where the colour in his work came from. Finally she went up to Jean-Claude with a piece of paper and a pen. She told him it was pointless waiting and asked him to leave his contact details. Then she returned to her desk. Jean-Claude gazed after her for a moment before scribbling something down. It was only after he had gone that she looked at the paper he had handed her. There, alongside his name and phone number, he had drawn a perfect likeness of her face.

There was a sudden commotion near the door. Bérénice, followed by a horde of people she did not recognise, was trying to push her way past Edward, Jean-Claude in tow. Thank goodness no one expected artists to

dress, she consoled herself, taking in his paint-splattered jeans and unshaven face. She turned her attention to Bérénice. At the concert she had been a redhead, now the fringe over her forehead was streaked purple, while the rest of her hair had been razored to the scalp. She was wearing flat green boots and a short green skirt that was too tight for her figure. Like Jean-Claude she had a black leather jacket, with the words 'destiny is hell' sprayed in silver on the back. Marion beckoned Jean-Claude.

'Can we have a word? In private.'

Jean-Claude left his friends to view the pictures and followed Marion to the back of the gallery.

'We're not ready for people yet,' she began. 'The caterers are only just setting out the food.'

Jean-Claude frowned.

'I brought them early to make more room later on. They'll go back to the pub once they've seen the paintings.'

Relieved, Marion nodded.

'Everything looks stunning by the way. I love what you've done with the lighting. Brilliant idea bringing in all those extra spots.' She smiled. 'I know we've had our ups and downs recently, but we've worked hard for this, and I wanted to wish you luck.'

* * *

Pouring a small glass of champagne, Marion tested its coolness. She allowed herself a few sips before scanning her price list. She had sold six of Jean-Claude's canvases, a number she expected to increase once Jean-Claude had given his speech. She was pleased with the way the evening was progressing. She understood an opening was first and foremost a social event, and that if people were enjoying themselves they were more likely to buy a painting. This depended partly on the physical environment and refreshments – which was why getting a professional to do the flowers and spending money on decent champagne were not optional extras. It also rested on a sense that there were interesting and important people present. She glanced at her guest list. Laurence Strong and Jen Smiley from the Green Box Gallery were there, and several of her Press invitations had been accepted. Rick Honeysworth, the international curator (who had scandalised the art world by exhibiting sketches from migrant factory workers alongside famous old masters) was

circulating happily. Earlier she had talked to Ian Pettegrew, the influential editor of *Art Forum*, about the shortlist for the Turner prize and he had asked for her mobile number.

She glanced across to the door where Edward was still on duty. So far, most of her sales had been to his wealthy business contacts, yet she knew better than to despise their relative ignorance of art. Especially at the present time, with all the cuts in public funding, artists and their promoters had no choice but to look to the private sector for backing. No matter if its motives for championing contemporary art were commercial: it was this money that would ensure Jean-Claude's success. Green Box had recently signed a deal with a restaurant chain on behalf of one of its clients for two million pounds and would be able to do a great deal with their share from such a sum. She had heard on the grapevine they had already taken on three new artists. She noticed Edward produce a card from his wallet and hand it to the man he was talking to. She smiled. He was doing his own piece of networking.

'Hi! Remember me? Mindy.'

Marion stared in disbelief at a tall, thin woman with long, black ringleted hair.

'Gerry heard about the show,' the woman explained, 'and I couldn't resist when I realised it was you. Gerry's still at Greville's – when he's not painting and decorating to pay the bills. We have two kids now.'

'Mindy!' Marion laughed. 'How long is it?'

'Only about a hundred years! I couldn't make it to your wedding – Gerry had a residency in the States – so I guess the last time we saw each other was at mine.'

'I thought you were in Australia.'

'Got back a few months ago, just before Ella was born. We're renting in Hackney. Right round the corner from our old flat.'

A sudden vision of the cold, damp, cramped attic they had shared floated into Marion's head.

'Listen, you'll have a million people to talk to and I can't stay. I had to bribe Gerry with the promise of a take-away even to get here. I've picked up one of the brochures with your number on it. I'll call you. Tomorrow?' She gave her friend a peck on the cheek. 'Great show.'

Before Marion could answer someone tapped her shoulder. She turned to find Michael.

‘Congratulations! I always knew you had it in you. What a turnout!’ He gestured at the mass of people.

‘Thank you.’ Marion lowered her folder so he could see her list of sales.

‘I noticed all those red stickers! I hope you won’t forget I gave you your first job. I always said I had a nose for talent.’ He tucked his arm conspiratorially through hers. ‘Now tell me, who did you get to do the hanging? I love all the spotlights.’

Michael’s false camaraderie irritated Marion. For thirteen years she had skivvied for this man, and in all that time he had either dismissed her suggestions as unworkable, or, on the rare occasions when he had listened, taken the credit for himself.

‘I’m sorry, I need to find Jean-Claude. Perhaps we can do lunch sometime.’

Leaving him by the drinks table, Marion climbed the spiral stairs. From here she would be able to locate Jean-Claude. She surveyed the scene beneath her. She spied Leticia Cartwright, art critic for *Culture Magazine*, and Jo Henderson from the Riverboat gallery. Steve Sands, who had first discovered Jason Cairn, was talking to a woman she recognised from *Big Brother*. Several other people had noticed her too, and were eyeing her with interest. Marion wondered if Sally Rivers from *Hot Stuff* had arrived yet: getting Jean-Claude into a glossy fashion magazine as well as the art journals would be a valuable coup. Her eyes scanned the farthest reaches of the room. There was Jean-Claude, talking to a woman with auburn hair. She made her way back downstairs.

‘Bravo!’ Marion gave Jean-Claude a kiss then stared expectantly at the woman by his side.

‘Well,’ she prompted, ‘are you going to introduce us?’

‘Yes of course. Marion, this is Celeste Coles. Celeste, Marion Richmond.’

The two women shook hands. Marion noted the dark eyeliner and heavy gold earrings.

‘Are you interested in contemporary art?’ she asked lightly.

Celeste guffawed with laughter.

‘You might say! I own a gallery in New York. Though I’m often in London hunting for new talent. Gordon Swann brought me tonight.’ She winked at Jean-Claude. ‘I’m very glad he did.’

Marion sensed the gauntlet being tossed at her feet. Gordon Swann owned Image Choice and they had been rivals during her three-year stint as gallery manager in North London, and she did not like the proprietorial

way Celeste's hand rested on Jean-Claude's arm. She schooled herself to remain polite.

'It's been a pleasure meeting you, Celeste. I need to whisk Jean-Claude away now. Let me get you some more champagne.' She signalled to a waitress, who refilled Celeste's glass, then manoeuvred Jean-Claude to a quiet space where they could talk. To her surprise, he turned on her.

'What did you do that for? I was getting on well with Celeste!'

Marion ignored the anger in his voice.

'You can find her again later. It's time you made your speech.'

'But she owns a gallery in New York.'

'Whoa! We're only just launching you in London! Besides, I know nothing about her. Have you got your script?'

'No.'

Marion opened her bag.

'Fortunately I printed a copy.' She held it out. Jean-Claude folded his arms across his chest, a stubborn child. The folder hovered unwanted between them. Marion felt her patience crack.

'For goodness sake! I was hoping we wouldn't have to go through this again! Look,' she pointed to a man in blue-framed glasses, 'there's Malcolm Attridge from Muse TV. Do you think he's going to feature you on his show if he doesn't hear a word from you? This is your chance to impress people. You can't just throw it all away. I've pulled out all the stops. The least you can do is have the decency to reciprocate.' She stopped. Her voice had increased in volume. People standing near were gazing at her in surprise. She grabbed Jean-Claude and pulled him after her into a storage room at the side of the gallery. Here at least they would not be overheard. She closed the door and forced herself to take several deep breaths. Jean-Claude fumbled in his jacket pocket for cigarettes.

'You can't smoke in here! You'll set off the fire alarm.'

'Damn!' The packet slipped from Jean-Claude's fingers. He stooped to retrieve it then stood up and leaned heavily against the wall.

'No one here knows anything about you,' Marion persisted. 'They can see your work, but we have to interpret it for them. We need to give people a sense of who you are so they can talk about you. You have to become somebody. Otherwise no one will buy your paintings, no matter how good they are.' She stopped, searching for an example to clinch her argument. 'We need *Hot Stuff* to photograph you; *Art Forum* to write you a rave review.'

Jean-Claude stared at her.

‘We can’t tell the Press what to write.’

‘No, but we can give them some sound bites. We’ve put all that hard work into your speech so people can quote from it.’ Marion, who had detected an awkward slur in Jean-Claude’s voice, wondered if he was listening. She waited a moment for him to reply, then burst out angrily.

‘Do you have any idea how many artists there are out there? Some of them highly talented. Most will be lucky if they earn enough from their day job to paint at weekends. You have an opportunity here. I’ve done my part – now you must do yours. I can’t read your script out for you.’

Jean-Claude peeled himself from his post by the wall and lurched towards the door.

‘I need a cigarette.’

A thought scissored Marion’s mind.

‘How much have you had to drink?’

In the harsh fluorescent light of the storeroom, Jean-Claude’s eyes were bloodshot. Her thought crystallized into alarming certainty.

‘You’re drunk!’

Suddenly, everything made perfect sense: Jean-Claude’s treasonous flirtation with Celeste; his scrabbling on the floor for cigarettes; his apparent inability to understand her. He could not possibly give his talk now. He might say anything: she did not put it past him to make a fool of them both by repeating what she had just told him. She had Edward’s business associates to consider. These people were no fools. They might find the provocation of contemporary art sexy, but a drunken artist would leave them cold. It was a spectacle they could witness all too easily around closing time outside any pub in Britain. She stifled her disappointment. Losing her temper would achieve nothing. Her strategy now had to be one of damage limitation.

‘Stay here. I’ll get some coffee. That should sober you up, then we can go back to the party. But I think it best if you leave the talking to me.’

* * *

Eleven canvases sold in total. Not bad for an evening’s work, Marion reflected, entering the figures onto her laptop. She looked at Edward sitting on the back seat of the car beside her, talking into his phone. She pressed her forehead against the window and watched the beams of passing headlights

as they swung in and out of her field of vision. No one could doubt the success of her opening. She may even have gained a small advantage from Jean-Claude's drinking. The fact that he had not spoken had given him an air of mystery. Dan Young, from *Visual World*, had asked to interview him, and she did not think he would be the last. So why did she not feel more elated, she wondered, relishing the cool pane of the window against her skin? Why did she feel as she so often did at these events, like an onlooker at someone else's party? She remembered the gymkhanas her mother had taken her to as a child. Marion was a good rider but never came in the final three. Then, one year, Marion was awarded the trophy for best-presented pony and rider. Her name was announced over the tannoy and her mother ran to hug her, eyes swimming in proud tears. She pinned the scarlet rosette to the pony's bridle, helped her to remount, and with a flick of her whip urged them into a canter. As Marion performed her lap of honour, she remembered her mother rising at five to groom her pony and plait its mane and tail. By the time she came downstairs, her mother had ironed her jodhpurs and shirt and polished her boots. It was her mother who had won the prize.

Edward was still talking. Marion clicked on her iTunes and picked out a piano concerto by Tchaikovsky. Clipping her earpiece into place she heard the horns play their opening fanfare. As the piano came in, she thought of the young Estonian pianist and the swiftness of his fingers across the keys. A hand touched her arm.

'Tired?' Edward asked, shutting his phone.

'No, not really. Though I can't stop wondering what would have happened if Jean-Claude had read out that script.'

'I'm sorry about that, especially after all the work you put in. Though in the end it didn't seem to make any difference. How many paintings did you sell?'

'Eleven. And a commission. Perhaps you're right. Most artists give a carefully rehearsed talk these days – usually badly. How about you? I thought I saw you do some of your own wheeler-dealing.'

Edward tapped his phone.

'Anderson is going to let us have his account. Eleven paintings and a commission.' He gave a low whistle. 'That's impressive. Though I must say I'm not surprised. You looked like a goddess.' He tucked his arm round her waist.

'I met an old flat-mate,' Marion told him.

‘Oh? Someone you were close to?’

‘In that studenty, staying up half the night, plotting our ideal future sort of way. I almost didn’t recognise her. She used to wear the most outrageous outfits but tonight she was in jeans. She and her husband have recently moved back to London. I might try to drop in the next time I see Jean-Claude.’ She squeezed Edward’s hand.

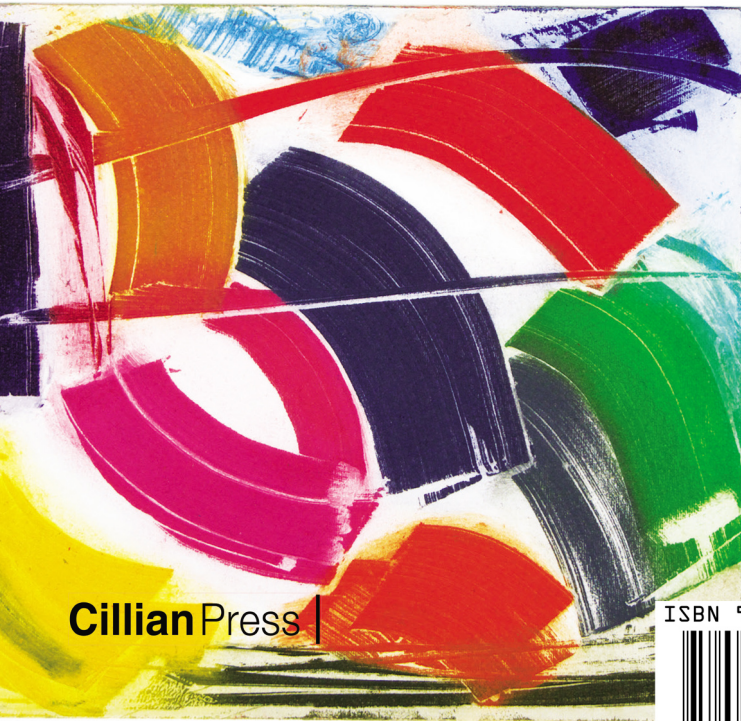
‘I’m pleased about Anderson. It’s always easier to clinch deals when you relax. And thank you for all you did for me this evening. It wouldn’t have gone half so well without you.’ The car turned off the motorway and Marion saw the sign for Steepleford. ‘We’ll be home soon. Did we get through all the champagne? I only managed a taste.’

‘I put a bottle in the fridge before we left. Just in case you felt like celebrating.’

At 39 Marion has a lot going for her. She's talented, ambitious and married to a wealthy financier who adores her. She's also capable of lying when the odds seem stacked up against her, but she's a good deal more vulnerable than she lets on. Amidst the glamour and spin of the contemporary London art and classical music worlds, money rules and an artist's skill is rarely enough. Marion's top clients – a brilliant French painter and a virtuoso Estonian pianist – benefit from her entrepreneurial flair, but when her husband says it's time they had a child, this contrary heroine loses her grip and the cracks in her carefully constructed lifestyle start to show.

Will Marion become ensnared in the web of deceit she has cast round herself? Or can she learn enough to save her business and her marriage? In this new novel by the award-winning author of *Vanessa and Virginia*, it is you, the reader, who is given the choice.

Given The Choice is a book about growing older and growing up, about making choices and learning to live with them.



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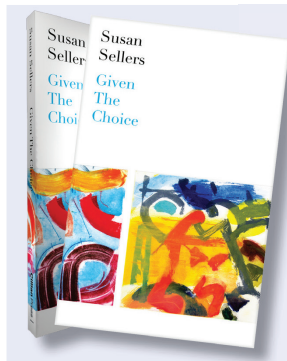
Given the Choice

by Susan Sellers

Title Information Sheet

From the award winning author of *Vanessa and Virginia*, *Given the Choice* is about growing older and growing up, about making choices and learning to live with them.

At 39 Marion has a lot going for her. She's talented, ambitious and married to a wealthy financier who adores her. Marion's top clients benefit from her entrepreneurial flair, but when her husband says it's time they had a child, this contrary heroine starts to panic and the cracks in her carefully constructed lifestyle start to show. Will Marion become ensnared in the web of deceit she has cast round herself? Or can she learn enough to save her business and her marriage? But in the end it is the reader who is given the choice.



- Set in the contemporary art and music world, it raises the question of what constitutes talent and what talent is worth.
- Challenges the reader with a less than likeable heroine.
- Deals with the pressure on women who are not instinctively maternal, and who don't want to have children.
- Deals with the difficulty men may face when they want children, but their partner would prefer to remain childless.
- Provides a series of viable alternative endings – giving the reader their own choice of what happens to the main characters.

”



About the Author:

After a nomadic childhood, Susan Sellers ran away to Paris. While studying for her doctorate, she worked as a barmaid, tour guide and nanny, bluffed her way as a software translator and co-wrote a film script with a Hollywood screenwriter. She became closely involved with leading French feminist writers and translated *Hélène Cixous*. From Paris she travelled to Swaziland, teaching English to tribal grandmothers, and to Peru, where she worked for a women's aid agency. Moving to Scotland she became a Professor of English at St Andrews University, began to write fiction, and won the Canongate Prize for New Writing in 2002. Susan has published sixteen books, although *Given the Choice* is her second novel. Her previous novel, the critically acclaimed *Vanessa and Virginia* (Two Ravens Press, 2008) was translated into various languages and has been adapted for stage, performed at the Riverside Studio, London (Spring 2013). Susan now lives mostly near Cambridge with her husband, a composer, and their son.

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