

O BEAUTIFUL

*"Wonderful, memorable...
A novel about my
favorite kind of love—obsessive,
unrequited and impossible...Jesse Green
writes with precision and intelligence."*

STEPHEN McCauley

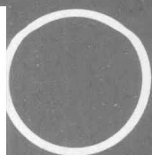


a novel by
JESSE GREEN



Ballantine/Fiction/37470/\$9.00 in USA • \$11.50 in Canada

4067623



BEAUTIFUL

a novel by
JESSE GREEN



AVAILABLE PRESS

Ballantine Books

New York

Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized. If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the publisher as "unsold or destroyed" and neither the author nor the publisher may have received payment for it.

An Available Press Book

Published by Ballantine Books

Copyright © 1992 by Jesse Green

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 91 90658

ISBN: 0-345-37470-3

Cover design by Darrin Elhardt

Cover illustration by Terry Widener

Art direction by Barbara Leff

Book design by Beth Tondreau Design

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition: May 1992

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

| BÉCHAMEL

A perfect combination of raised blue veins on Martin's right foot spelled *M*. His mother traced it out for him before he could read. She sang "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and other songs that featured the letter. Her normal voice was light and distracted, but when she got to an *M*, she'd lean down into his face, close her lips, and sing louder, buzzing almost. She'd squeeze his foot, holding the note, until her breath gave out. Then she'd lose interest. She'd race through the rest of the song, barely audible, and rock Martin quickly in the hard, white rocker.

The *M* grew larger as Martin did. Now, at the end of a long day of walking, he'd find it pulsing beneath his socks, huge and livid. It was certainly a sign, but of what? His mother had said it was there to remind him who he was, should he ever forget. She herself had a mole on her wrist that helped her tell left from right, or used to. But surely these engravings of the body have more to say than that, thought Martin. Surely one must attempt to obey them.

The building he lived in now had thirty identical floors, each with apartments designated A through P. At first he had hoped for an *M* apartment, even though *M*'s were far too expensive. "What on earth will you do with three bedrooms?" his mother had asked. "Are you out of your mind?" In the end, he had settled for a one-bedroom J, but it made him uneasy. It was like ignoring horoscopes, even if you didn't quite believe in them.

Over the years he had looked upon people whose names began with *M* as possessing some special potential affinity. He had slept with a man named Max on no other evidence than his promising initial. After thrashing around in the sheets for an hour, he'd suddenly forced Max to look at his foot.

"What?" said Max, panting and droopy-eyed.

"On my foot, look, an *M*."

Perhaps that's what scared Max off.

■ ■ ■

so Stella's announcement was a little unnerving. "Don't be a baby about this," she said, surprising Martin at the theater on the day his new show moved into New York. "Just hear me out." She kissed him hello, on the top of his head, causing him to smile and then to shiver. Martin, who had been scratching methodically at a set of blueprints, put down his mechanical pencil.

"Don't be a baby about what?"

"There's a guy named Matt I want you to meet." She handed Martin a Styrofoam box.

"In here?" he said, tapping the lid.

"No, my dear, in there is lunch. Japanese. It's like a briefcase—you should like that."

Inside, there was a piece of raw fish, a tiny fried object, a mound of rice spiked with red and green.

"Oh my Lord."

"I thought you liked Japanese. I thought you'd like the presentation at least." She took off her coat, facing away. "No matter. I guess I can eat it."

"I guess you can," said Martin. He studied her tense, liquescent body. "That's a nice dress."

Stella picked at the collar. "Perry Ellis sale," she said. "Ninety-eight dollars. There's a pull in it somewhere." She sat down and looked at the bright, empty stage. "What's going on? Where is the set?"

Martin made a beagle face. "One of the trucks got in an accident on the way from Philadelphia. The side sheared off, stuff flew out. Apparently there were looters. People stopped their cars and took what they saw on the road. The driver said he saw a woman running off with a ficus before he blacked out. Who knows what else? They hired a new truck, but it hasn't come in yet, and we're falling behind."

"Falling behind," Stella repeated. She cracked apart the fused chopsticks and started to eat.

They were sitting in the balcony of the Mark Hellinger The-

ater. Onstage, electricians were installing what lights they could. Standing on top of ladders and scaffolds, they reached high above their heads into the darkness with their tools, as if to clean the underside of an enormous animal.

"Are you pretending you didn't hear what I said?"

Martin shrugged.

"It's not a death sentence, Martin. You said you wanted to meet people is all. I'm complying. I'm *trying* complying."

"I didn't say people."

"Well, what then?"

"I mean not plural. Not *people*. Not random *people*. Not humanity at large." He frowned. "What *is* that, zucchini?"

One bite more and whatever it was was gone. "I'm not discussing humanity at large," said Stella. "I'm discussing one particular *piece* of humanity. One particular nice, *good-looking* piece, if you really must know." She flipped a vegetable over and back between her chopsticks until it was completely denuded of its dressing. "Someone I myself might like. A nice *person*, if you get my drift. A nice *person*. A very nice *person*."

There was entirely too much emphasis in her voice, and Martin picked up his pencil. "Why should he like me?"

Stella sighed. "Oh, Martin. With an attitude like that, I really couldn't say." She closed the empty Styrofoam box. "I love this stuff, this Japanese *stuff*. It's not like eating. Or rather, it *is* like eating, but not like eating food. It's like eating an idea. You know, Martin—" She pointed to the stage. "*That* would make a wonderful something."

One of the electricians had dropped a sheaf of gels from the top of his ladder. Amber, blue, green, and pink squares were swooping through the air, hesitating then sinking. Stagehands leaned in from the wings to watch. "Beautiful," said Stella. "If you like that sort of thing."

The gels all landed. The hammering and the chirping of wrenches resumed.

"Well, I should be going," said Stella, rising. "But why don't you come with me tonight? There's an open studio. It might even be good."

Martin made a doubtful face then shook his head no. "Artists," he said. "You can have 'em."

"Oh, but I do," said Stella.

STELLA used to be fat. When Martin first met her, she wore bright floral outfits with wings and dropped waistlines. *Slimming* was the word she employed to describe them; she said it sadly but hopefully, knowing it was at best only marginally true. In a store, she'd hold a dress to the mirror and demand an opinion. "Slimming?" she'd ask.

Martin could not bear to tell her that the dress would heighten, not disguise, her problem. All the colors, all the shapes and panels and pleats: they drew the eye unfailingly to the place it least was welcome. Even when the outfit was less commandeering, Stella made up for it, fussing and arranging. Just to sit down she had to wrap herself up like a restaurant napkin, fold all the pieces over and over according to some intricate plot in her head. Then she felt compelled to talk about it. The tag itched. The wide, stiff belt pinched at her side. Couldn't she leave well enough alone?

No, she couldn't leave well enough alone—because she wasn't. *Well enough alone*. Lacking companionship, she made lovers of her clothes, which mistreated her, as men did, but never ran away. She could count on them to touch her, to come alive upon her flesh.

Once, just as a concert was about to begin, she leaned toward Martin and said she was feeling a draft.

"Where?"

"My dress," she hissed.

Martin had to laugh. It seemed entirely plausible to him that the dress might contain its own private weather: tropical depressions, a simoom blowing up from the south.

"What's so funny?"

He wanted to say, "Your dress doesn't fit, it doesn't suit you in the least, and that's why you feel so uncomfortable in it." That was the truth. But she took criticism so poorly, he didn't dare risk it. Instead he took her hand and whispered, "You know I think you're beautiful, Stella."

"Don't patronize me. I'm not a child."

Stella could not take a compliment. When people told her, as they inevitably did, what a fine-featured, lovely face she had, she wrinkled it up in a horrible mask to prove how wrong they were. "Right," she'd say. "And what about my hair?"

In fact the hair was beautiful, too, shiny and black like licorice; but she cut it herself without a mirror and stuffed it up in a purple beret. She set about almost scientifically to disguise her most attractive features. Martin had once seen her from across Broadway, elbowing her way through traffic with a sour look on her face. She was wearing medals and false epaulets on a belted pea-green blazer, and she looked like a compressed Latin American dictator.

He had been shocked to glimpse her like this, so cruelly revealed in the light of day. Usually he got to see her in circumstances she controlled: alone, in an apartment, in the dark corner of a neighborhood restaurant, or at dusk at Lincoln Center by the fountain. She always arrived early and discovered Martin before he discovered her. "Martin," she would announce, "Martin. Here." And there she would be, waiting, in a shadow.

But across Broadway he had seen her without her approval, like the awful time he had glimpsed his mother through the frosted shower door. He held his hand to his mouth. "Oh my Lord," he muttered, the breath of it warming his palm. He had not before realized how ungracefully she walked, how fierce, how heedless. Poor Stella, he thought, and then, ashamed, ducked beneath the bright umbrella of a pretzel vendor's cart.

It was a betrayal to notice any of this, and more a betrayal, noticing, to hide. She wasn't an object to be studied, and pitied,

at a distance. Martin knew how much she suffered with her weight. Had she been less willful, less defended, she might have blown apart from the humiliation of it. Instead she managed to stay together—wrapped up, it was true, cinched in by her clothing. But no matter how she achieved her cohesion, at whatever cost, she deserved respect for succeeding. Martin, who stood alarmingly tall at six-foot-five and weighed alarmingly little at one hundred and eighty pounds—who had nothing tangible to make complaint of—had half her humor, half her drive.

He blamed it on growing up rich. All things came easy, even heartbreak, and money poulticed every wound. Were he to lose a job, he would not go hungry—he would not, in fact, eat any differently from the way he ate before. Were he to lose what little remained of his family, he would only be richer, he sometimes thought. There were truths but no consequences: consequences were what poor people suffered. Rich people never touched ground long enough to stir them up.

As a teenager he had thought he would someday grow out of the feeling, but now, at twenty-seven, he knew he would always regard his life as a fiction. Stella was one of the few things in it that uncontestably passed as real. Before he met her, nothing around him was constant enough and near enough, both at once, to keep him in place. Among his family, he felt like a comet in irregular orbit. Among his college friends, he felt merely insufficient. They were lofty, or unreliable—by which he meant they dared to change. They moved constantly closer to achievements Martin could barely credit, let alone attain. Their horizons were so wide. The life they hoped for was like some magnificently squalid village in India Martin had no desire to visit. Mystics or no. But he could not argue the merits of his narrowness. Even if he could, his friends were not the types to join him in it.

But Stella was. She didn't waver from her established role. From the time he had met her, three years before, at the midtown gallery where she sold him a chair, she had kept to her script. "If I

sit on this," she had said of the graceful Sheraton, "I'll have to sell it as a collage. But you go ahead. You've got the right lines."

Martin had laughed without thinking. Her joke deflected consideration of the pain involved in its construction. He merely sat on the chair as invited and admired the satinwood marquetry. "It's beautiful," he said.

"If you like that kind of thing," said Stella.

They met a few times more while dickering a price. If the gallery wasn't busy, they'd sit—on modern, purple swivel chairs. She'd gone to Yale, majored in art history, written her thesis "on Rubens, of course." In their third conversation, when the name of a common acquaintance came up—as if this alone afforded permission—they finally decided to meet for dinner.

At the time, Martin was still suffering under the delusion—or perhaps by then it was only a hope—that he might yet find some way to be straight. Stella, it turned out, had no such ideas about him. She had made the correct assumptions from the start. "Really, Martin," she would tell him later, "who else is coming into galleries just because he likes the art?" As a result of her certainty she was completely exuberant that first night at dinner, while Martin sat listening, stiff as an umbrella. "Heh-heh," he would laugh, sharply, at right angles.

It was a tiny nouvelle French restaurant—this was 1981. Everything in the room save Stella was excruciatingly dainty. The breadsticks were almost two feet tall, delivered to the table in a cerulean vase. Martin noted these details for possible use in a show someday, a contemporary comedy, Neil Simon perhaps. Then, over an appetizer so self-conscious it seemed to be spelling its own name on the plate, Stella mentioned to Martin the name of their mutual acquaintance.

"Miriam Sutter," she said. "She's pregnant, you know. She's keeping it, too. Though I couldn't say why. Something about *human life*, I suppose. Whatever that means."

Martin looked amazed. "But how did it happen? I mean, Miriam Sutter?"

"If you prick us, do we not breed?" asked Stella. "I don't mean *you*, of course."

Martin liked that. He was known, it seemed, without having had to make the effort. All that painful wrangling with pronouns, all that agony over colors and signs—obviated. There was no need. There was no use, and there was no need. The umbrella of his spine opened up a bit and rendered him buoyant, for a time, at least, with Stella in restaurants.

BUT after he saw her across Broadway that day, Martin noticed a change in Stella's behavior. She spoke less when they met, and drew him out instead. Not quite imperceptibly, the frequency of their meetings diminished. Had she seen him hide? Sometimes he thought she must have. For now she called only at times she knew he was out and left messages on his machine that said, "Nothing important, no need to call back." And often he didn't. He wasn't one to insist. Only when time seemed to be swelling up dangerously between them did he drop in at the gallery, leave a note at the desk. Even so, he got no response. Weeks went by—it might have been months. At Christmas, he mailed her a homemade card with heartfelt wishes, awkwardly worded.

The card, or perhaps the new year, did the trick. The fifth of January, 1983, she showed up at his apartment unannounced. "That doorman of yours," she said as she entered. "He'd let in the Mansons."

"He remembers you."

"And you, Martin? Can you forgive me? I've been an alarming jerk." She lay down on the sofa and put her feet up on its arm.

"Of course I forgive you."

"Then that's done," she said. "I'm mending fences right and left. Well, only left, really. I'm giving up on the right. I'm mending fences on the left and building *trenches* on the right. Wait, what does that mean? Is mending fences patching up friendships? Or patching up what divides them?"

"Good fences make good neighbors."

"Do they? Do they, Martin?" She scanned the apartment briefly to see what might be new. "Pretty flowers," she said.

"I was a little worried when I went to the gallery and the woman didn't seem to know you. Did you get my message?"

"Not exactly."

"Not exactly?"

Stella took a deep breath and exhaled ostentatiously. "Martin, I quit three months ago. I started my own place with Patrice and Ellen. In the East Village. It's all contemporary—trash, probably. Constructions, you know. Abstract. You'd hate it. My grandmother died in September and left me some money—that's when this all started. I got back from the funeral and turned off my phone and sat around and just thought. Oh, Martin, I'm such a louse not to have told you. And I could have used your help, too. The place was a mess when we signed the lease. Dropped ceilings and all. There was tin underneath, but we didn't know how to strip it. Patrice did something that turned it brown."

Martin stared. "Patrice?" he said.

"This French guy I met. We had an affair, I'm sure I don't know why. Green eyes, I suppose—well, you know. Oh, Martin." She pursed her lips before resuming. "I got pregnant, of course, the one time I didn't have my diaphragm with me. What a joke that I should prove so fertile."

Martin stared at her, attempting to determine how far along she might be or if, God forbid, she had given birth and was even now secreting on her person a hitherto undetected infant. The way Stella dressed, it was difficult to tell. "And what—well, when—I mean," he stuttered.

"Don't look so scared, it was only a few weeks."

Martin said, "Oh." He looked at the floor.

"And don't be disapproving, baby," Stella said with surprising conviction. "Please, I couldn't stand it now. And anyway, we Jews are allowed. Encouraged, even, I would almost say." But now her voice guttered. "There was a stainless steel bowl."

Martin opened his mouth to speak, but nothing intelligible

came out. He was thinking: How could so much happen so quickly? How could so much happen at all? And then his breathing became irregular; the sound of wind picked up in his inner ear. He feared he might faint—something he did occasionally, and had done since childhood, for no known reason. He closed his eyes, as his mother had once suggested might help. He imagined a Brandenburg Concerto playing, but slow as a dirge. He exhaled on the downbeats and soon enough the wind subsided.

"Are you all right?" Stella asked. "It's not that fainting thing again, is it?" She didn't quite believe in the fainting.

"Just a little startled. Can I get you something?"

"Do you have bottled water? I'd love bottled water."

Bottled water must have been Patrice's innovation. Each new lover brought a new drink with him; once it had been Frangelico. Martin stocked them all, but this new request he was not yet prepared for. Iced tea, he decided, would have to do.

Though Stella had disappeared before, she had never disappeared for so long. What was the purpose of these vanishing acts? Was she incapable of changing—as Martin was—except in the dark? Was life something she feared would embarrass and dismay him, as he had once feared his wealth would discomfit her? For Stella was wealthy, if mere movement, if turmoil, was tender. And in these terms Martin was poor, but happy. Nothing speakable happened to him. During the time Stella had been out of touch, yes, he had fallen in love four times, but he'd never mentioned it to anyone—not even to those he had fallen in love with. And so here he was, just as he had been, Frangelico, vermouth, Midori in the cabinet, while Stella was trailing an entirely new cast of characters on the couch.

"Was it awful?" he ventured.

"Ask me no questions," Stella replied, "and I'll tell you no truths." She bit her lip. "Doll," she added.

From the kitchen pass-through, slicing a lemon, Martin peered at her between the hanging copper pots. Something else had changed besides the names in her stories. He noticed ankles

where her legs had formerly run directly into her shoes. "You've lost weight," he said carefully.

"The abortion," she replied. "I don't recommend it." She idly opened a magazine.

But as the weeks passed, a waist began to appear in the midst of her dresses when she turned within their massive volumes. Her chin started poking from its collar of fat until the fat disappeared and only the chin, hard and square, remained. Her features emerged like new terrain from an ice age receding. There was a bigger, dramatic nose, and larger, apparently greener eyes. Specific breasts took form where a vague sloping plane of chest had been. And muscles moved slightly but unmistakably beneath the fabric of her sleeves.

Stella was thin. She had gone into hiding and altered herself completely. The tent dresses and muu-muus were replaced with clothes so simple as to almost not be there. A sheath of black was all you would notice, a few pieces of jewelry as punctuation. No bright sashes, no berets. The hair was cut in an expensive salon whose name she perversely refused to divulge. She ran three times around the reservoir each morning, whatever the weather, allowing no exceptions. And Patrice had apparently been shed with the weight.

When complimented on the transformation, she changed the subject. When complimented on her clothes, she told Martin where she had bought them, what percent off, how long the sale was likely to last. She trained him to avoid making comments at all, but he still shook his head a little when he saw her. How could people change so quickly? How could people change at all?

Stella ignored his wondering looks. She dropped an opinion or a random piece of gossip, like food into a fishbowl. "If I have to go to another lunch with Caryl Crower, I'm giving up the business," she'd say. And then they'd talk about that.

AS if it were the natural consequence of her physical transformation, Stella quickly became successful in business. In April she

sold an entire roomful of oils to a movie star who was seeking investments. The commission was enormous. Talk got around, articles appeared, and within a few months she was a *figure in the art world*. The movie star, reconfirmed in his doubtful taste, returned for more. He bought out a show of vorticist drawings, had them delivered to a bank for safekeeping.

Stella was pleased—Martin could tell because she affected ennui. Oh, she didn't care so much about celebrities; celebrities were erratic, she said. But they brought in the others, the society wives with their decorators, the lone-wolf professionals on their way up. These were the people who followed trends, who redid their homes every five years.

Soon limos lined Sixth Street from noon to four, absurdly sleek amidst the crumbling tenements. But the incongruity was part of the draw. People started saying to her, "You just can't find things this *vital* on Madison Avenue." And Stella would nod. It was true, you couldn't. What she sold was nothing if not vital, even if the quality varied tremendously. But the quality was irrelevant, she found. Anything she pointed to became desirable to her clients: broken plates, graffiti on glass, mutilated books. Occasionally it was even unnecessary to point. A stockbroker visiting the gallery between installations asked to purchase whatever might be coming in soon that was large enough to put above his sofa.

From the way Stella told these stories, from the tone she employed in describing the transactions, a stranger would have assumed she had a low opinion of art in general, and nothing but a mercenary interest in the whole dirty business. Martin knew better. It was all a smoke screen. The comments she made were meant to obscure her almost embarrassing reverence for beauty, a reverence constantly threatened by the very means of promoting it. But the means were fascinating, too. The game turned her on—prices and reputations, rumors and feints—though it was a game in which it was better that people not