THE TRANSIT OF VENUS by Shirley Hazzard

The story begins in the 1950's in an English countryside. In the midst of a sudden summer storm, a stranger with a cheap suitcase walks towards the country house of a famous old astronomer. The stranger is Edmund Tice—"He was young and poor and had the highest references—like a governess in an old story." He is also an astronomer, and has been sent to help the elderly, ailing Professor Sefton Thrale write a report about a telescope site. Tice turns out not to be the governess type at all, and actually he was never really accepted by the Thrale household.

At the astronomer's house are other visitors—two beautiful and well-bred sisters from Australia, orphaned when their parents were drowned in a ferry boat accident.

The novel centers on the lives and loves of the two Australian sisters. They were raised by a half-sister—the impossible Dora, who nurtured a ravenous self-love, a "self-punishing punisher". The sisters assumed Dora as a moral obligation. She was strong in her power to accuse, to judge, to cause pain, in her sovereign power. Dora's skilled suspicion would reach unerringly into your soul, bring out your worst thoughts and flourish them for all to see; but never brought to light the simple good. It was as if Dora knew of your inner, rational, protesting truth, and tried to provoke you into displaying it, like treason. One
of those persons who will squeeze into the same partition of a revolving door with you, on the pretext of causing less trouble." The girls heard it said that Dora was raising them. Yet it was more like sinking and always trying to rise. In their esteem for dispassion they began to yearn towards some strength that would in turn disturb that equilibrium and sweep them to higher ground."

The two sisters emigrated (in their early twenties) to England, and to America, in the mid-20th century.

Grace Bell, the younger sister, blond and pretty, more easily domesticated, is engaged to the son of the old astronomer--Christian Thrale, a government official in Canada.

Caroline Bell (or Caro), the older sister, dark, striking, cool, and more beautiful has different ideals and principles than Grace.

And neither is quite what she seems.

"You could see the two sisters had passed through some unequivocal experience, which, though it might not interest others, had formed and indissolubly bound them. It was the gravity with which they sat, ate, talked, and, you could practically say, laughed. It was whatever they exchanged, not looking at one another, but making a pair. It was their eyes resting on you, or on a wall or table, weighing up the situation from a distance of events and feelings; their eyes which had the same darkness if not the same distinction."
At the astronomer's house on a summer day, during a violent rainstorm, and the electricity goes off, with the crops standing "upright in the fields like hair on end", Professor Thrale tells the story when his house-guests are gathered at his table about the 18th century explorer, James Cook, who found Australia by accident when he was trying to chart the course of Venus. Cook missed Venus because "the calculations were hopelessly out". And so, "transit of Venus" occurred in the 18th century, the planet Venus crossing the face of the sun. It was misunderstood, "Calculations about Venus often are", states Ted Tice.

Grace Bell is settled early in life, confined to the dull, priggish Christian Thrale, the British bureaucrat, and her life story constitutes a lesser theme.

Focus is on the sister Caro, whose "transit is circular, seduction, and abandonment, then marriage, widowhood, reunion with her betrayer, and at last with the astronomer, Ted Tice, who loved her all along."

Three men enter Caro's orbit, and fall in love with her because "there was the everlasting, irritating and altering impression that she addressed herself to an objective beyond the small, egoistic drama of their own desires."

The first is Ted Tice, the young astronomer, who loves Caro the moment he sees her at the astronomer's house. He is obsessed by her and reserves his best love for her all his life—as an "intensification of his strongest qualities, if not of his strengths; not a youthful adventure, fresh and tentative, but a gauge of all effort, joy, and
suffering known or imagined. The possibility that he might never, in a lifetime, arouse her love in return was a discovery touching all existence. In his desire and foreboding, he was like a man awake who watches a woman sleeping."

Even after their first meeting he realizes he has to face up to the reality of having to do without her. "Like a detective, he noted callousness, the lover's indifference to the unbeloved. 'And there is nothing I can do to alter or stop any of it. She can destroy me and there is nothing I can do. I can't prevent her from sleeping with her lover, or from loving it and him'. Tragedy is not the love that doesn't last, but the love that does last."

Tice later marries a woman, Margaret, who understand all too well his affection for Caro. He becomes famous and he and his wife are invited everywhere in the world.

The second is the godson of Mrs. Thrale, the attractive but cruel Paul Ivory, a successful playwright, a manipulator of other people's lives, who becomes Caro's lover and shadows Caro's life like an evil genius. "In its subtlety and confidence Paul's physical beauty, like his character, suggested technique. As some fine portrait might be under-painted dark where it showed light, or light were dark, so might Paul Ivory be subliminally cold where warm, warm where cold--Similarly his limits might seem the instruments or weapons of grace rather than its simple evidence. Paul's
attenuated fingers turned up at their tips with extreme sensitivity, as if testing a surface for heat." Paul Ivory marries the beautiful aristocrat Tertia Drage, (who had lovers of her own), rather than allow Caro power over his emotions--harboring throughout his marriage a secret guilt. One time when Paul and Caro were together he gives directions to a taxi-driver "You can let us off here. It's a cul-de-sac--once in, you can't get out." Caro did not let herself be taken in by his love and he detects this. When she was told that Ivory's wife was pregnant, which meant she was to be discarded, she suffered much grief, but did not give in. "Though the dissolution of love created no heroes, the process itself required some heroism. There was the risk that endurance might appear to be enough of an achievement. This risk had come up before."

Tied down by her feelings, Caro is also stuck with a boring London office job, part of a world of women whose lives are of such day-to-day dreariness that it is "hard to say how or why they stood it, the cold room, the wet walk to the bus, the office in which they had no prospects and no fun." Relief comes to Caro when Adam Vail (the third man) an American comes in to the office, in an effort to persuade the British Government to help him prevent the execution of a group of South American political prisoners. He is a man of wealth and decency, kind and cultivated,
whom Caro marries. Caro moves to New York after her marriage to Vail, and finds it difficult to adjust to her surroundings. "A ceaseless milling of persons was unnatural; ludicrous, determined as the acceleration of an old movie. There was anonymity and extreme loneliness, but little reverie and no peace. Apartments were cabins in great liners docked among the streets." In her state of martyrdom, she is found by her husband weeping, after reading one of Hardy's poems:

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,
And much have they faced there, first and last,
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
But what they record in colour and cast
Is—that we two passed!

Through it all, Caro uses her freedom to become an increasingly fine observer. She accompanies her husband to South America on his business, where they stay several months. There she talks to a poet recently released from prison, but crippled from torture and doomed to be sent back as soon as the Government is overthrown. She listens as he explains himself, saying "Any proper struggle against injustice is an access, merely, for more normal confusion. For myself, there is nothing I'd like better than to go back to squabbling about usual things." She thinks of the fools she has known and wonders why he should have to die
so that they "can waste the world's time." He tells her "that despite all he has endured he has learned that to be too thoroughly on the right side is also to err, because the right side can impose its lies." "Even though the right side dislikes the man who stands alone," he says; and she recalls what a woman she once knew said about the uncommon man being the one who gets everybody's goat.

By now, Caro had reached higher intelligence, experience and learning, and returning to the United States, she undertakes a translation of the man's poems, but she receives an amusing note of encouragement from him, saying that if he dies under the spectacular conditions of imprisonment, the publicity should be enough to get the poems published— which is exactly what happened.

Much too soon, Adam Vail suffered a stroke..."Dies in America. Suddenly at his home after an active career, marked by and culminating in, considered aloof, nevertheless loyal friends, recently awarded, travelled, resided, founded, collected. Married twice; first and then to the former Caroline Bell...One daughter from his first union. Dead and gone, at one stroke. Peacefully."

Caro bore her loss with as much composure as the world could reasonably, or otherwise, expect of her. But in private would still make clumsy appeals, to God or to the dead, and disfigure remembrance with salt tears; while Adam in her thought, remained always calm. She said, "Memory
is more than one bargains for. I mean, if it goes on like this, this sense of past, past, past, that it can turn even the happiest memories to griefs."

Caro is then left to roam about, having gotten accustomed to isolation, this was not a problem to her.

Although Grace and Christian Thrale were well-matched in what appeared to be a perfect marriage, they at different times during the course of their marriage, experienced a passionate encounter with someone else. He with a typist in his office which affair was of very short duration while his wife was out of town. Grace with a 32 year old physician Angus Dance, who was treating her son for a back ailment. "She held imaginary discourse with Angus Dance, phantasmal exchanges in which Grace was not ashamed to shine. There was a compulsion to divulge, to explain herself, to tell the simple truth. The times when she actually sat by him and looked at X-ray plates generated a mutual kindliness that was the very proof of human perfectibility. One day, passing a paper from hand to hand, their fingers touched; and that was all. The bare facts of Grace Thrale's love, if enumerated, would have appeared familiar, pitiful, and--to some--even comical." "By now Mrs. Thrale had committed adultery in her heart many times." Then...Angus Dance was to be transferred to a better position in Leeds, and her children and husband were making more demands on her.
time...With these prospects and impressions, "Grace Marion Thrale---43 years old, stood silent in a hotel doorway in her worn blue coat, and looked at the cars and the stars, with the roar of existence in her ears. And like any great poet or tragic sovereign of antiquity, cried on her Creator and wondered how long she must remain on such an earth."

As Caro came out of her eye doctor's office, her eyes smarting, and fumbling for a handkerchief, the ledge of the curb baffled her vision. And a man coming from a doctor's office next door spoke her name. "That you should be here." It was like Paul Ivory, on a strange continent, to be surprised at Caro's presence on her own street. He said, "My son has leukemia." Tears streaming down his face, he told Caro how he had brought Felix (his son) to New York because there was a doctor, a hospital, a treatment. She invited him in to her home, where she gave him a drink and allowed him to talk about Felix. On leaving he asked to return another time...which he did.

It was on a very rainy day that he came. It was at this visit he related to Caro how he had had a 16 year old young boy as his lover, who, along with his father who did odd jobs "but always with something shady on the back burner" had blackmailed Paul Ivory...continually getting money from him, and when they read about his new plays and the successes he had, and ready to expose him, asked for more and more.
One day his lover said to him, "You are my pension plan."
Then one afternoon when he had found his young lover sleeping on a river bank, he left him there to drown when a dike broke further upstream. He could have wakened him and saved him, as he had been warned in time about the possible flooding, but he did not. While he had been standing there looking at the sleeping boy before the flood, a man passed on the other side of the stream a few yards away. "He paused under the trees and looked at us, at me." "He saw at any rate that Victor was only sleeping, and walked on upstream." That man was Ted Tice, who having secretly helped a German in the war, and fearful of being exposed, never mentioned seeing Paul Ivory at the stream.

Caro said, "Was it revenge then, on Ted---that you took up with me?" "There was that in it, naturally. That I should carry you off while he stood watching." "And a turning of tables on Tertia, too, who had taken to parading her lovers in my face." "There was that risk in both these things---in maddening Tice and antagonizing Tertia, and I liked the risk."

"The feelings roused in her were animal: these chairs and tables withdrew from Paul, as did the furniture of this woman's memory. Paul had become everything shoddy, derelict; the torn kite unstuck from the sky."

Caro saw him to the door. Following the storm, a sickly
warmth; a humid sun pearling a film of gasoline on the streaming street. Rain water swirled in sluggish gutters, redepositing rubbish. As much as might be hoped for on a day when none could look for cleansing or refreshment, and in a place that seemed itself, a sullen challenge to the elements." He said, "Caro, good-by."

Josie, Caro's step-daughter had travelled to Sweden and remained there. She was to have a baby. Caro decided she would go to see her in September after the baby was born. On her way, she visited her sister Grace in London. "In Caroline Vail's own life and thought, Ted Tice had become supreme. Consciousness of Ted Tice was the event that pervaded her waking and sleeping life. She dwelled on memory, and on possibilities remote as memories. For the first time, had dreams in which she and Ted met as lovers, in a vivid, unfamiliar land. She would think how little, even of kindness, she had every given him." "She thought how she could go to him, and yet would not. She imagined her arrival, his happiness, his joy."

She had no more control over these fantasies. She tried to see how it had come about, and only knew she had been seeking some extreme. That extreme might be the force, pure and terrible, of a man's attested strength of will. It was as if Ted Tice had created this event in her through the cosmic power of love. She was helpless to change, though not to act.
Grace handed Caro a newspaper. There was a photograph of scientists leaving on a government conference. Flanked by politicians, Ted Tice looked straight ahead. He had the private civilized face one sees on the interpreter between two grimacing heads of state. Grace said, "You see that he'll be in Sweden while you're there presenting a paper on a controversial theme." Caro said, "I haven't called Ted this time." She said, "If Ted calls." The corners of her lips were not quite civilized. It seemed she might not speak again. High feeling was ultrasonic, audible. "If Ted Tice rings up, I don't want him to know I'll be in Sweden. Or to see him there."

Ted went back to the desk, wrote a message, wrote her name. The concierge had seen this man's lean face in a newspaper, in connection with a university ceremony. Edmund Tice was approaching the peak of his career.

Yesterday Grace had said on the phone, "So little time is left to tell the truth."

He went outside and looked at the harbor. When he returned to the hotel, Caro was at the desk asking for her key, holding out her hand to receive his message. He stood at a little distance, watching this dark stranger. She would turn and be fully known at last. He said, "I was thinking, before you came, that I hardly knew what you look like. I'd lost the image with picturing it." Caro said, "I have never been so glad to see any human face." They went out on a ferryboat ride on the Royal Canal, and when he held her hand, said "Until now I never touched you." "No."
Ted Tice said, "Will you say you love me?" "With all my heart." He looked at the trees lolling in white water. These trees were in his eyes, in streaks, in tears.

He could see her pondering in a moment, the coming hours and years that were closed to her, unknowable. Only he could know, having prepared for this always. He said, "Trust me." The passengers on the ferryboat saw these two who represented love. The sweetness that all longed for night and day. Some tragedy might be idly guessed at...loss or illness. She had the luminosity of those about to die.

That evening and the following day, a university was to celebrate Ted Tice's achievements. "I have to speak there tomorrow afternoon. Then they all go on, these people to Rome and Sicily, where there is a conference." He said, "I will do what you choose, and go wherever you are." "The world would manage without me if I died. Why not if I lived?" He said, "I'm afraid to leave you, to lose you." "You won't run away. When I call you in the morning, you'll be there." "Yes." -- "In any case I'll find you."

At the airport under the "Departures" sign, "I said I'd find you." She said, "I'd have been gone, but for the strike at the other end." She put her hand in his. He said, "I thank God and the trade-union movement." Caro was next in line at the check-in counter, and he prevented a porter from taking her baggage. They sat down. There was a sign that said "Passengers in Transit". He touched her face. "In one hour
there's a flight for Rome. If you take it, I'll join you there by evening." She was weeping. "Ted, what can change for us?" He said, "I have telephoned Margaret. I've told her." "Even through a telescope, some people see what they choose to see. Just as they do with the unassisted eye." He said, "Nothing supplies the truth except the will for it." Looking away as if ashamed. "I cannot so much as say I've been true to her; she has never required that form of truth from me."

He stroked back her hair. He was exercising great kindness; she must be helped through this. Despite himself his strength blazed like rejoicing. That she was her leaning and weeping, and loving him best.

He said, "I'll go and get the ticket." and his own mouth trembled on prosaic words. He took out paper and pencil and wrote the name of the hotel in Rome.

She had stood with a crowd on a shifting stair and raised her hand, and he watched her go. There had been an earlier farewell, many years ago, when he had told her "I will accept any terms," and she had stood remote, not knowing it for a rehearsal.

Caroline Bell Vail never got to Rome. The concierge at the hotel said to his family that evening, "He was in the hotel on Tuesday. Large as life."

June Eckert
December 14, 1981