*“The Decision*” *by Nadya Mahdi*

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The moment she pushed her foot into the black patent leather boots and fastened the silver buckle across the toes, Elizabeth knew they were in charge now. As she walked along this prestigious Mayfair street, her heels clicking and her toes pinching; the boots were beginning to give her the strength she needed.

When she had spotted them that morning in a shop window on Oxford Street, Elizabeth knew they were perfect. She had loitered outside, waiting for the shop doors to open. The young security guard had surveyed her as he unlocked each grill and Elizabeth could feel his gaze travelling the length of her legs as she pulled at the hem of her pencil skirt. She felt angry with herself for blushing; she would have to develop a thicker skin in future. She wondered whether it was worth running to the phone box at the top of South Molton Street to let her work know she was late but rummaging in her pockets she could only find a ten pence piece. Elizabeth rejected the idea of running to the newspaper kiosk for more change, instead, she found herself seated on a steel, upholstered chair, fingering her shiny plunder. The toes were slightly squared off, giving an air of authority, the heels, two and a half inches high, just enough to provide the elevation required without causing her to teeter foolishly.

With the boots securely fastened, Elizabeth ceased to worry about being late and decided to walk the rest of the way. She cut down the side streets where Oxford Street met the more salubrious Bond Street frontages, housing expensive jewellery and watch shops. Elizabeth normally felt intimidated by the suited guards who would meet and greet the ladies who shopped and lunched for a living, but today she felt confident and found herself striding past. At the top of Savile Row, she stole a look at herself in the shop front of the bespoke gentleman’s tailors; her head brimming with the sense of freedom that lay ahead. She had hoped to catch sight of her boyfriend Pete, who worked as a codger, a sort of sub-class of the row’s tailors whose job it was to renovate suits. But there was no sign of Pete’s reassuring smile. “He must be out back,” she said to herself; that’s when she noticed the boots were pulling her away from the window.

From Savile Row, Elizabeth and the boots turned into Piccadilly, towards Eros and past the Criterion. The restaurant, with its ornate decor and French accented waiters, brimmed with a continental opulence she had never experienced. Her heart skipped at the idea that she could change that. Before she had put the boots on, she had asked herself if she was doing the right thing. She knew she would not miss her commute from Gants Hill; bumping along the central line from East to West, but what about the Friday night drinks with her friends? What if there was no job to come back to after six months, wasn’t she scared? Her friends had probed. It wasn’t that unusual, she thought, for a girl to go alone; after all, she had met countless Americans “doing Europe” when she had gone to collect her Youth Hostel membership. Elizabeth’s main concern was Pete; would he wait for her or find another girl to take to Camden Palace on Tuesday nights? She imagined the boots were pinching her to create a distraction from these worries.

The traffic on Piccadilly Circus was almost at a standstill now, taxis hooted and Routemasters heaved their way along Haymarket. Elizabeth covered her mouth as a brown Mini with a smoky exhaust backfired in front of her. She craned her head upwards, to see where the top of her work building met the cloudy sky. On her first day, five years ago, she had felt fresh and eager; thinking the job of telex operator for an importer and distributor of leather goods, a glamorous one. She did not realise her work colleagues would be the two cold, steel telex machines she surveyed and operated for nine hours a day; with their large soundproofing covers that made the rattling devices look like giants in a dolls’ house office. And Elizabeth was no longer the excitable school-leaver, bowled over by a regular wage; it was going to be her twenty first birthday next week and she had still never left this island. The telex shipment messages had taught her the names European cities and she was now familiar with the middle East too. Elizabeth imagined it was the machines themselves that had willed her to experience these cities first hand. She pictured the map above her bed, with its trajectory of drawing pins, tracing the route she planned to take to Turkey. She could hitch a lift from one of the trailer drivers whose trucks her company used; that would get her to Le Havre for free. From there, she would be alone, travelling by inter-rail. She took a deep breath to quell the butterflies in her stomach.

Elizabeth strode through the foyer, her heels clicking on the parquet floor as she headed for the squeaky lift; its aching walls only had the strength to house four people at a time but Elizabeth was alone and the lift purred at her slight frame. She imagined she could already hear the telex machines on the 4th floor. They would be making their whirring sounds, receiving instructions from all over the world: “Boat delayed Le Havre, goods arriving Ankara ETA 2100 hours tomorrow, container details to follow.” The boots propelled her towards the frosted glass door, through which she could make out the silhouette of the Personnel Manager. Elizabeth pushed open the creaky door, her formality had deserted her; she smiled and let the boots do the talking.

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