

THE IMITATOR

REBECCA STARFORD

'What a rare treat to find a novel that offers both white-knuckled suspense and evocative, beautiful prose. I loved it.'

HANNAH KENT, author of
Burial Rites and *The Good People*

‘*The Imitator* gripped me to the end: I devoured it. Rebecca Starford has created an exceptional work of historical fiction, bringing 1940s England to life in formidable, compelling detail and thrusting the reader into a world of wartime spies, betrayal and surprising revelation. What a rare treat to find a novel that offers both white-knuckled suspense *and* evocative, beautiful prose. I loved it.’

HANNAH KENT, author of *Burial Rites*

‘A poignantly rendered narrative map of one woman’s journey from misfit to spy—and a thought-provoking examination of the gently human desires that lay the groundwork for pernicious extremism. Rebecca Starford has given us a rousing reminder of the power of our choices.’

JULIET GRAMES, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Seven or Eight Deaths of Stella Fortuna

‘Rebecca Starford seems to be the inheritor of the cool, narrative elegance of Graham Greene and John le Carré. Her building of the tale to reach the critical moral apogee of this book seems effortless, and she has found a fascinating and unexpected World War II corner of espionage and intelligence to exploit for a plot that runs like milk and honey.’

TOM KENEALLY, author of *The Dickens Boy*

‘I can’t think of a single person who wouldn’t love this novel. Both a gripping thriller and a deep character study, it will appeal to those who love espionage epics as well as lovers of literary classics. Starford’s handling of her protagonist’s internal divisions is assured and completely engrossing, the scene-setting rich in historical detail but never overdone. You’ll tear through *The Imitator* in one weekend, I guarantee it.’

BRI LEE, author of *Eggshell Skull*

**THE
IMITATOR
REBECCA STARFORD**


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First published in 2021

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Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 76052 979 6

Set in 11.8/17.1 pt Minion Pro by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press, part of Ovato

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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*Who has not asked himself at some time or other:
am I a monster or is this what it means to be a person?*

CLARICE LISPECTOR, *THE HOUR OF THE STAR*

MARCH 1948

ONE

EVELYN SPOTTED STEPHEN across the busy road. He was leaning against the railing outside the Hotel Russell, a grand old building on the eastern flank of the square, reading a paperback, his collar turned high about his throat. As he pulled out his pipe and rummaged around in his pockets for a light, Evelyn felt the sluice of anticipation; it was like encountering him for the first time, though they had in fact been meeting every Friday afternoon for the past year. Walking towards him, she observed him as a stranger might, taking in his crumpled overcoat, his loosened tie, his flushed cheeks. He whipped off his trilby and gave her a lopsided smile.

‘Ah, there you are, Evelyn.’

He clasped the felt brim, as if uncertain about what to do with his hands now he’d shoved the book and pipe away in his coat pocket. After all these months, they still weren’t quite sure how to greet one another. He finally nodded towards the hotel’s *thé-au-lait* terracotta entrance.

‘So, fancy that drink? I’m absolutely parched.’

He held out an arm by way of invitation, and as he followed her up the stairs and through the hotel’s revolving doors, Evelyn caught his familiar scent of pipe smoke, cologne and warm, damp hair.

They were seated by the dome window overlooking the square, their usual table. Though it was nearly five o'clock, the bar was empty apart from a man beside the piano with his head buried in a newspaper. Once the waitress, a big-boned girl with a Lancashire accent, had taken their orders, Stephen began to talk about his new commission. Since the war he had worked as an Italian translator—novels, mainly, as well as the occasional cache of documents for the embassy—and he had been invited by a professor in Rome to visit the university over the summer to deliver a paper and begin a new translation of Ovid.

'They're putting me up at La Sapienza,' he said, settling into his chair. 'In halls, which'll be jolly. When that's done, I thought I'd mosey about. Travel down to Naples. Sorrento, maybe. Duck over to Capri.'

'What about all that sunshine?' Evelyn teased. Stephen, it had become their joke, could burn in a blizzard.

'Blimey, yes.' His eyes grew wide. 'It will be raging, won't it, in July?'

The waitress returned, struggling under a silver serving tray laden with a tumbler of whisky on ice for Stephen and an enormous teapot, china cup and rock cake, beige and swollen like a deformed hand, for Evelyn. It was good tea here at the Russell, none of the ersatz stuff she had to buy from her local grocer's, and fragrant with an earthy spice.

'Well, it sounds like you'll have a lovely time,' she said.

'That's the thing. I'll be away for a month. At least. And, yes, it will be a fine sort of trip . . .'

Stephen paused, took a gulp of whisky, and when he set down the glass he stared at it as if it were the receptacle of an ancient wisdom. Evelyn saw something in his eyes she didn't recognise—it might have been dread. He spread his hands against the tablecloth.

'The thing is, Evelyn, I don't want to be away for a month. From you. I had rather hoped you might come with me.'

The top of his ears had turned red. Evelyn sat back; he had surprised her. She picked up the blunt knife and began sawing into the rock cake. The pianist started up a playful tune in the corner.

‘You don’t need to answer right away,’ Stephen said quietly. ‘I’ve caught you unawares.’ He looked into his lap. ‘But will you think about it?’

‘Yes, of course.’ Glancing at his thinning hair, the fine freckles across his broad nose, Evelyn felt a throb deep in her chest. ‘Of course I’ll think about it.’ She reached out, grazing her fingertips over his knuckles. ‘I’m so pleased you asked me, Stephen, really I am.’

‘Mm.’ Colour had risen in his cheeks and he wouldn’t look at her.

Evelyn clasped her hands together. She had hurt him. Sometimes she forgot she could still inflict pain on others.

‘Very good. Right. Well.’ With a rattle of his empty glass, Stephen stood up. ‘I think I fancy another.’

Evelyn watched him as he made his way to the bar. He dragged his left foot. It had been crushed by a pontoon at Dunkirk; he had been lucky not to drown. He was shy about his disfigurement but never ashamed. It was perhaps the first thing that drew Evelyn to him: the ease with which he spoke about the past. That, and how he never asked for much in return, even when she knew he must want her to share more of herself with him.

She rubbed at her eyes. The truth was she wanted to go to Rome. But there were so many complications—her papers, for one. How could she explain it all to him?

While Stephen lingered at the bar, she turned her attention to the window and the gardens outside. It was busier now, men and women streaming from the terraces surrounding the square, battling their way through the gaggle of children mobbing the Wall’s ice-cream man on the corner. Evelyn’s gaze rested on a small girl and a dark-haired woman. The girl, in a smart woollen dress, was chattering away,

while the woman—her mother, Evelyn presumed—flicked through a picture-card stand by one of the stalls set up along the garden fence. Evelyn watched the graceful swoop of her gloved hand until, almost as if she sensed she was being watched, the woman turned. Her eyes met Evelyn's and what followed was a moment of perfect calm, just as the air had felt before a shell dropped.

'You do like brandy, don't you? I can never remember.'

Setting a drink in front of her, Stephen followed Evelyn's gaze, one hand pressed into his back. 'I've never understood how children can eat ice-cream in the cold.'

A bus rumbled past, a few cars.

'I say, are you all right, Evelyn? You're awfully pale.'

Evelyn sat up straighter as Stephen, face pinched-looking, crouched in front of her.

'Look, you needn't worry about the Rome trip, honestly. It was just a mad idea.'

She scanned the square for the woman and the little girl, but they were both gone.

'I mean, I could ask Timmy Walker to come. You remember Tim? Foreign Office. He's always had a bit of a thing for the Romans . . .'

Evelyn listened to Stephen's prattle, not wanting it to stop. As long as he kept talking, she could convince herself that she had imagined it. That she hadn't seen Julia Wharton-Wells at all. But then, after a burst of laughter from the lobby and the tail end of the pianist's song, came the cry: *'Evelyn?'*

Her voice still had that breathiness, as though she had just sprinted across the street.

Turning, Evelyn saw the little girl first, and up close she recognised the straight, almost black hair and the same watchful amber eyes. Julia stepped forwards, arms outstretched, and before Evelyn

knew what she was doing she was on her feet, Julia's smooth coat, cigarette smoke and perfume caught up in their embrace.

'Julia? I don't believe it!'

She had aged. Of course she had; it had been nearly eight years. Still, as Julia stepped back, holding her at arm's length to look her up and down, Evelyn was shocked by the grey in her hair and the constellation of lines around her eyes and forehead.

'It's really me—ta-da!' Julia's grip was tight around Evelyn's wrists. She gave a sharp bark of laughter and let go, gesturing to Stephen. *'And who is this?'*

Evelyn introduced them, and Stephen, who had watched their greeting with bemusement, said, *'You must join us for tea. I've not met any of Evelyn's pals—I'd love to pick your brains.'*

Evelyn glared at him. *'Julia will surely have other plans.'*

'What do you think, Margaret, darling?' Julia peered down at her daughter as she removed her gloves. The young girl was eyeing up the rock cake. *'Daddy won't mind if we're a few minutes late, will he?'*

Margaret shed her green coat. *'Daddy won't mind,'* she repeated solemnly as she took the seat opposite Evelyn. She was missing a front tooth.

The waitress appeared with more cups and saucers, and everyone watched her pour the tea. After she'd gone, Julia sat down and unwound her expensive silk scarf, eyes skating about the bar. She wore a red box coat that matched her lipstick; Evelyn had forgotten how striking she was.

'Are you staying here at the hotel, Evelyn?'

'No, we're—' She felt Julia's frank gaze. *'We were just having a drink.'*

'I see.'

'Then we're off to a film over on Tottenham Court Road. In fact, we had better be going, hadn't we, Stephen?' Evelyn glared at him

again, desperate to communicate her agitation at this unexpected meeting.

But Stephen wasn't looking. His attention was on Julia, perhaps wondering if she held the answers to his many questions about Evelyn's past.

'Don't worry about that,' he murmured. 'There'll be a later showing.' 'See?' Julia patted the chair beside her. 'No rush.'

Somehow, Evelyn managed to sit down and smile graciously around the table. She still couldn't believe it was Julia sitting across from her. Was this what it felt like to encounter a ghost?

'I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me when I saw you, Evelyn. After all these years—I had to come over and make sure.' Julia laughed again. 'But you haven't changed a bit. I suppose you're still at the same job, too?'

'Evelyn works in a bookshop,' Stephen said, bringing out his pipe. 'Foy's, on Store Street. You know it?'

'Store Street?' Julia glanced at Stephen, something flinty and appraising in her expression. 'No, I don't think so. But I will remember to drop in sometime.'

Evelyn wanted to shriek at Stephen to shut up. She imagined old Mrs Foy, alone in the flat above the shop, Julia prowling about the shelves of Margery Allinghams, and she swigged a mouthful of brandy, feeling it burn down her throat.

'And how do you know one another?' Stephen scraped a match against the box and lit his pipe. 'From Oxford, was it?'

'The war, actually,' Julia said.

'Really?' He leant forwards. 'Evelyn's always coy about her war years. So you were at the hospital, too?'

Julia's eyes slid towards Evelyn. She picked up her teacup, raised it to her lips.

'It wasn't quite like that. We moved in similar circles, that's all.'

‘Did you?’

Stephen turned to Evelyn, gave her shoulder a light nudge with his. He was enjoying himself; there was a smile playing over his mouth. Evelyn gripped her knees beneath the table, nails digging into her stockings. She had to disrupt the conversation, swerve it away from anything that might compromise her. She focused on Margaret, who was picking despondently at the rock cake. If Julia had a weak spot, surely it would be this child.

‘I didn’t know you had a daughter,’ Evelyn said. ‘She looks just like you.’

The last bit of sun had come out from behind the low grey clouds, flooding the front bar in dazzling light. Julia set her teacup back down in the saucer.

‘Margaret keeps us on our toes, don’t you, dear?’

The girl looked back at her mother doubtfully.

‘How old is she?’

Julia stared at Evelyn, her jaw a hard line. ‘Five next month.’ She threaded her fingers together. ‘We’ve been lucky. I never thought . . .’ She trailed off, gave a shrug. ‘But I do like this part of town,’ she said, sitting up straighter. ‘I don’t live in London anymore. We’re in Kent these days and very happy there.’ She shook her head. ‘Why am I telling you? I suppose you already know. But we do like to come up to London, don’t we, Margaret? The children’s park over at Coram’s Fields is marvellous.’ She paused. ‘You’re locals, I take it? You and your . . . husband?’

‘No, we’re not . . .’

The pianist had stopped and Evelyn could see the waitress watching them from behind the counter, her curiosity plain as she toyed with a loose apron thread. Even the man in the corner had lowered his newspaper to peer at them. Could they sense it too? Evelyn wondered. The disquiet in the room? It was practically crackling.

‘We’re not married.’ Stephen finished the sentence for her, and Evelyn felt him edge away, a cool space flourishing between them.

Julia nodded. ‘I always thought I might run into you. Though I expected you to have left England years ago.’

‘I did think about it. But one thing led to another. Work, you see . . .’

‘Ah, yes. Did you stay on long, in the end, at the War Office?’ Julia brushed at some non-existent crumbs on her dress, her eyebrows arched. ‘Anyway, now I know where I can find you, we must get together for a proper catch-up. I think that’s long overdue, don’t you? Perhaps the next time we’re down. Like I said, we’re on our way to meet Margaret’s father.’ Julia was smiling, but there was no feeling in her eyes. ‘I don’t think you ever met him. He certainly knows about you.’

The hairs on the back of Evelyn’s neck bristled. ‘Well, it’s been lovely,’ she said as she stood up. ‘But we really should be going.’

She looked at Stephen; this time he understood and rose to his feet with her.

‘What a shame! I should have liked to talk more.’ All conciliation, Julia began fishing through her leather handbag. ‘But look, before you go, let me give you something. I picked it up at the stall across the street. It was such a coincidence to find it there. I’m sure you’ll remember it.’

It was a postcard, a reproduction of *Judith in the Tent of Holofernes*, and as Julia passed it across the table Evelyn felt her stomach lurch. She didn’t know the gallery had the painting—the Randalls must have sold it after the war. She stuffed the postcard inside her bag as Stephen drifted off to settle the bill.

‘It reminded me of a story I heard years ago . . . Anyway, I’ve dozens of the things in the kitchen drawer at home, but I keep buying another every time I see one. We visit the gallery when we’re in town, though I’m not sure why I keep returning to that ghastly place.’ Julia

was clutching the back of the chair, her fingers as bloodless as talons. ‘You always did like art, didn’t you, Evelyn? And books. Clever as you were. You always thought you were so much cleverer than the rest of us. But it didn’t quite turn out that way, did it?’

Evelyn took a step back. The room seemed to tilt. Around them the bar was starting to fill.

Stephen returned, and she felt his hand on her arm, though it wasn’t clear if he was steering her towards Julia or away from her.

‘Turned to smoke and ashes, has it?’ Julia was staring at the half-eaten rock cake.

Evelyn glanced at the door. Two dozen paces, maybe less. She could make it. She took another step, conscious of the pressure building behind her eyes. The room had begun to spin and the tables roared—wild, jabbering voices. She could hear Stephen talking, his voice floating towards her as if she were trapped under water, the pale light above the surface gradually dimming, and the next thing she was aware of was his grip around her elbow as he guided her past the bar, the off-key notes of a new prelude ringing in her ears.



Stephen walked her home. After the scene at the Hotel Russell, neither of them had much desire to go to the pictures or find somewhere to eat. They made their way in silence, Evelyn one pace behind, trying to make sense of what had just happened and how she might explain it to him. But when they reached her building on Flaxman Terrace, he stood on the kerb, hands shoved deep into his coat pockets. She couldn’t tell whether he was angry or not; he was looking at her in the same way Margaret had as they left the bar: as if she had done something to humiliate all of them.

‘Who was that woman?’ he asked finally. His voice was gentle, but rounded with curiosity.

Evelyn stared at him across the pavement. 'I told you. An old friend. Not even a friend, really. An acquaintance.'

'But why were you so . . .' He blew out his cheeks. 'I don't know—peculiar. I've never seen you like that.'

Evelyn glanced towards her flat, where the orange light of the lamp glowed at the window.

'It was a surprise, that's all. I've not seen her in such a long time. Years!'

'Years?'

'Just don't ask me how many.'

She tried to smile, but Stephen took off his hat and said, 'She thought you worked at the War Office.'

'Did she?'

'Yes.' He frowned. 'You heard her, didn't you?'

'She must have been thinking of someone else. It was a long time ago.'

'But you worked at the hospital.'

'Yes, I did. She was confused, Stephen, that's all.'

Stephen folded his arms, giving her a hard look. Evelyn began searching through her bag for her key. She couldn't stand him watching her like that, incredulity in his eyes, demanding something of her that she couldn't give.

'I'm sorry about tonight,' she said. 'I'm not myself, you're right. But I'm tired—that's all. So very tired.'

Immediately his face softened. 'Why didn't you say?'

'Because I wanted to see you, that's why.'

It had taken Evelyn some time to acknowledge the depth of these feelings to herself. That come Monday morning she would already have started counting down the clock to when she would next see him.

Stephen blew out his cheeks again.

‘Can I at least fix you something upstairs? You’ve had no supper.’

‘No, I . . .’ Evelyn pressed her lips together, afraid she might cry. ‘I think I’ll just turn in for the night. But will you telephone tomorrow? We can make new plans.’

‘All right.’

Evelyn could hear the disappointment in his voice, but she was desperate to get inside; she needed to be on her own to think. From the main road came the trill of the bus, the sound of a man shouting nearer to King’s Cross station, the drift of a saxophone from the jazz club down the street. London was only now waking up for the night, but giving Stephen’s arm a squeeze Evelyn headed to the front door without looking back.



Later, Evelyn sat on the edge of her windowsill and smoked. From here she had a good view of the narrow street pocketed behind Euston Road. She wasn’t sure what she was waiting for. She finished her cigarette and pulled down the window, trying as always to close the gap where the frame didn’t quite meet the ledge. Wrapping a shawl around her shoulders, she slumped into the armchair next to the fireplace, which was a grim thing with a low mantelpiece and a blackened grate smelling of old coke. She glanced at her watch. It was late, nearly midnight, but she knew he’d still be awake.

She went to the bureau by her bed and pulled out the small leather address book from the drawer. Then she crept downstairs to the telephone in the hall and dialled. The call rang for so long she thought he wasn’t home until she heard the faint click of connection and that low, scratchy voice.

‘Stepney Green 1484.’

‘I’m telephoning for the weather report.’

There was a pause and a muffled sound on the other end of the line, like a sigh.

‘What have you observed?’

‘I believe summer has arrived.’

‘And the seed?’

Evelyn screwed her eyes shut. ‘It’s growing.’

The line went silent. Evelyn gripped the receiver. She didn’t know what she would do if he couldn’t help. But after several excruciating moments she heard his breathing resume.

‘Well, well. If it isn’t Chameleon.’ He let out a low whistle. ‘Bugger me.’

She slumped against the cool wall, almost faint with relief.

‘Hello, Vincent. I’m sorry to call so late.’

‘It’s no bother. I don’t sleep much these days, anyway.’ There was more clatter and another deep, puckered inhale—he must still be smoking those awful cigars. ‘You’re not in trouble, are you?’

‘I’m not sure. Maybe.’ Evelyn swallowed. ‘Something happened tonight. I’m not sure what to make of it. I know it’s been a while, but could we meet? I’m in Bloomsbury.’

‘I know where you are, darling.’ She could hear the shape of Vincent’s smile. ‘All right. Tomorrow morning. Zafer’s, Lavender Hill. Ten o’clock.’ And he hung up.

Back inside her flat, Evelyn returned to the window. The night outside was blotchy like spilt ink. Among the shadows she could just make out the cat belonging to the lady at number twenty scavenging through a dustbin and, further along the street, in the direction of Mabel’s Tavern, Old Jim the street sweeper bent over his broom and shovel.

She glanced back at her bed, at the slim pillow resting against the headboard, and felt her chest ache. How long was she prepared to live

like this, to be always furtive and afraid? What if Stephen didn't call her in the morning? What if her reticence that evening—a reticence they both recognised but had never brought out into the clear air—spelt the beginning of the end between them? In some ways, it would make things easier. To always wonder. To never test the strength of her feelings. Because she had told herself that if it ever came to this she would run. Pack a bag and catch the first train to meet the ferry. She still had contacts in Belgium; Christine might help her. She still knew how to become another person.

But it was too late. She couldn't leave—she didn't know how to anymore. Flight was part of the past, the old days. It sounded almost quaint how people spoke about the war now, as if they were only cracking open an old biscuit tin and not the lid of an ancient sarcophagus. Yet that was how it felt to Evelyn as she sat in the gloom, head pressed against the cool glass: as though she had been woken from a curse.