

# BECKWITT'S ROOM

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Translated from Catalan by Julie Wark

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**SYNOPSIS**

## **Part 1**

### **THE ACTOR'S ROOM**

At quarter to three in the morning, one rainy weekday, a half-naked man, shouting and out of his mind, tries to force his way into a house in the Costa Brava town of Roses. The occupants, two elderly women, terrified by the wild howls of the man and his attempts to scale the bars of the fence, call the police. They discover that he is injured and bleeding. When the police car arrives the man runs away, stumbling down the road towards the beach. The police subsequently report that he has been detained.

The two startled women are the mother and aunt of Judit Morató. The following morning they tell her about the incident that has taken place the one night of the week she hasn't slept at home. Judit works in a residential area on the outskirts of Roses, in the house of Ben Beckwitt, an elderly, eccentric and very rich American. A year ago, on her first day at work, she was shown the ropes by Lisa, whose relationship with Ben is not very clear. A cook and a chauffer also work at the house, which is on the top of the mountain of Puig Rom, a zone that is almost deserted in winter.

Judit's everyday life with Ben is revealed, along with her rapid discovery that this man for whom she is working as a secretary is an American actor who was world-famous and very fashionable in the 1950s. Ben is now living a peaceful life far from his old haunts in Hollywood and his presence in this town in the Empurdà region of Catalonia is a secret Judit must keep. The relationship between Ben and Judit goes through several phases: the trust between them grows to their point of their becoming confidantes; Judit tells Ben about a tragic event in her life when she was a little girl (which is not disclosed to the reader until Part 2 of the novel); Ben tells her about one of the many episodes that have estranged him from his two children, Samuel and Cindy. On this occasion, Ben, completely drunk, had offered his adolescent children to a Hungarian

aristocrat for his sexual enjoyment in return for a large amount of money. For him it was a kind of joke but his children experienced his eccentricity in a very different way.

In Ben's house, Judit deals with Lisa, who turns out to be a former Hollywood groupie and present executor of the actor's estate, doctor McKenzie, his Texan psychiatrist, and Marthe (one of Ben's ex-wives and an actress) along with her three children, Melvin (who, it is hinted, might be an unacknowledged son of Ben), Brandon and Tim. Through their words and their relationships with the actor, Judit works at constructing an image of the man she is looking after. Among the activities they share (writing down, reading and commenting on Ben's dreams, translating and analysing articles on the cinema, watching films in the private screening room of the house and classifying the books in the library) there emerges the possibility of Judit's writing down and editing Ben's memoirs.

One day, after an incognito outing to the cinema in Roses, Ben presents Judit with the gift of a trip to London so that she can look for a scriptwriters' school. Scriptwriting is perhaps what Judit would like to do henceforth in reorienting her professional life.

## Part 2

### THE ARTIST'S ROOM

Samuel Beckwitt lives in London where he is a successful artist. Always accompanied by his highly-efficient secretary Mel, Samuel is planning a major installation in the Tate Modern.

Out of the blue, Melvin Beckford, Marthe's son, arrives in London to stay for a while and asks Samuel (whom he calls "uncle") to put him up temporarily. Melvin is nineteen, his lifestyle is wayward and he wants to get rich working in a webcam sex site. Samuel, who has always considered himself to be liberal, bohemian and unprejudiced, feels somewhat responsible for the future of the boy and doesn't know how to advise him without being labelled as a reactionary old fart.

Samuel's life unfolds in first person, with descriptions of the people he sees, the television programmes in which he is interviewed, his work in the studio, his meetings at the Tate and his night-time sorties to the seemingly eternally open Fancy Rodríguez Club, which is decorated thematically: first in a re-creation of imperial Rome and, later, some version of hell or terror trip.

Samuel often mulls over his relationship with his father, Ben Beckwitt, whom he hasn't visited since he's been living in semi-seclusion in Roses. One day when he phones him, he finds him upset by a dramatic story he's been told by the girl who works as his secretary. Intrigued, Samuel quizzes Melvin about the girl and wonders whether his father has changed so much that he can be affected by the experience of someone other than himself.

One afternoon, as he's working in his studio, Judit Morató turns up unannounced at his door. The young woman explains that Ben has paid for her trip to London so that she

can look for a scriptwriters' school. Samuel and Judit would seem to have little in common but, somehow, Samuel feels intrigued by this stranger who was able to move his father with her story. They go out to dinner, talk about Ben and his relationships with other people, and end up in the Fancy Rodríguez Club.

One afternoon, while he's looking at Melvin on the website where he does his show, Samuel realises that the boy, who now calls himself "Beckwitt" has started working in tandem. His partner is a young man of Slavic features. Samuel wonders if they really have sex in front of the net surfers who pay for the private "show" and whether this should come under the heading of "prostitution". Samuel is at a loss to know how he should respond and seeks Judit's advice. Hurt by her words when she accuses him of being egocentric, he asks her what her own dark secret is. Judit tells him how a man posing as a ballet teacher raped her when she was a little girl in Roses.

That very day, Samuel decides to go to Roses and visit his father there for the first time. He finishes all the tasks he's working on, speaks with Melvin, trying to persuade him to try his luck as a film actor, and takes a plane to Girona.

He reaches Roses in the early hours of the morning. A taxi takes him up to Puig Rom. He finds Ben barefoot in the street in blood-spattered pyjamas.

## Part 3

### THE MODEL'S ROOM

A brief introduction shows Samuel, Ben and Judit in the police station of Roses. The police officer shows them a photograph of the man they have captured.

The setting is Saint Petersburg, in front of the Hermitage Museum. Thenceforth, the story picks up the trail of Alexei Ivanovich, a young man of twenty-five with a moral dilemma: to save or condemn to perdition the young boys who come to him looking for work. Alexei can put them into contact with old perverts who are looking for sex with minors. Alexei is undergoing transformation: he wants to be a new man. When Sergei, a pimp, offers him a job a long way from Russia he therefore jumps at it.

He travels to Slovakia with another young man, Pavel. In Bratislava they start working in a studio that specialises in exhibiting young people in an on-line peep show. Alexei isn't required to have sex with anyone. He only has to masturbate before the camera. He's happy with his new life.

One day Sergei asks him to go to London to work in a studio similar to that in Bratislava. Alexei is deeply indebted to Sergei. They are linked, furthermore, by the ever-present figure of Misha, a dissolute, unscrupulous man who has plunged his younger brother Alexei into a spiral of corruption and violence.

In London, Alexei meets Sergei in Hyde Park and is given the details of the job he is expected to do. It turns out that someone has discovered, on a live-sex website, a boy who claims to be the son of Ben Beckwitt, the retired American actor. Alexei's role is to befriend the kid and get all the information he can as to the whereabouts of his father. The aim of the exercise is to break into the old actor's house. Alexei refuses to participate but Sergei has a card up his sleeve: Misha, his brother, who is in a deplorable

state thanks to his many addictions, is begging for his protection. To prove the truth of his words, Sergei makes a phone call. Misha, broken and ill implores his brother to help him.

Without Alexei knowing, Misha is speaking from London. Sergei has brought him there prior to sending him on to Roses. Misha's morale and physical state has hit rock bottom. He is subsisting on hits of cocaine. Some days later, Misha, accompanied by another Russian, Alvis, arrives in Roses to bring off the robbery. Despite his weakness and ineptitude, Sergei wants him there in Beckwitt's house.

The night of the robbery, everything runs to plan. Alvis takes charge of the old actor once they have knocked out the chauffer, the only other person who sleeps in the house at the top of Puig Rom. Ben refuses to tell him where he keeps the safe. Then, while their accomplices ransack the mansion, Alvis and Misha force the old man to get on to Internet and look at the site where Melvin does his show. The boy isn't alone. He's with Alexei who, armed with a knife, is threatening to slit his throat. Ben reveals where he keeps the money.

Gagged and bound, Ben is witness to how the others try to liquidate Misha with a shot in the back before escaping. In a terrible state, and badly in need of a hit, Misha begs for help. Ben attempts to tend to his wounds and injects him with a strong sedative. In some kind of act of redemption, he tries to help this stranger who has such a terrible story behind him, telling him to go to Judit's house, in the centre of town. Misha, hurt, sedated, half naked and without any other option, leaves the house, heading out into the rain in search of his last chance of salvation.