

The Favours and Fortunes of Katie Castle



Rebecca Campbell

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Campbell R.

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«HarperCollins»,

Fabulously funny, sharp and totally unputdownable first novel from a great new talent 'My name is Katie Castle, and this is the story of how I had everything, lost it all, and then found it again, but not quite all of it, and not in the same form, and, if I'm perfectly frank (which, I have to confess, doesn't come naturally) not nearly so good.' Katie's adventures in the world of London fashion, from the giddy heights to which she's already schemed, via the warehouses of the East End, the glamour of Paris and the abrupt descent to the polyester nadir of Willesden, mark an exceptional debut on the fiction scene.

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Copyright | 6 |
| Contents | 7 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 35 |

rebecca campbell

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Part One: the razing of katie castle](#)

[chapter one: the way we were](#)

[chapter two: in matching knickerbockers](#)

[chapter three: cavafy, angel, and the loading bay of doom](#)

[chapter four: a technical interlude, concerning](#)

[chapter Five: visceral couture](#)

[chapter six: how can i deny, she's mine, i'm hers?](#)

[chapter seven: the deed of darkness](#)

[chapter eight: a short chapter, punctuated by a colon](#)

[chapter nine: zenith](#)

[chapter ten: in which katie doesn't cry](#)

[chapter eleven: the house of mirth](#)

[chapter twelve: the second time as farce](#)

[chapter thirteen: katie looks back in languor](#)

[Part Two: the three metamorphoses of the spirit](#)

[chapter fourteen: katie's dead-dog bounce](#)

[chapter fifteen: nadir](#)

[chapter sixteen: katie goes native](#)

[chapter seventeen: tea with the ayyubs, a gaudy bullfinch, and other festivities](#)

[chapter eighteen: strange meetings](#)

[chapter nineteen: a winged victory](#)

[chapter twenty: ending in a colon](#)

[chapter twenty-one: and ludo](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Keep Reading](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

[Part One](#)

[the razing of katie castle](#)

[chapter one](#)

[the way we were](#)

At five past six, every day, the same question:

'Katie, what have you *done*?'

For some people that might have been a question filled with foreboding. You know, what have you done with your *life*; or look what you've screwed up *now*. But from me, at this time, it always got the same answer, a smart answer:

'Made coffee, chatted to the girls, tried (and failed) to make the printer print, had my nails done next door at the NY Nail Bar, went for a latte at Gino's (flashed my second best smile at the divine boy, Dante, but I wouldn't tell *Penny* that), chatted some more to the girls, thought about the collection, phoned the factory (why *can't* they learn to speak English?), got a sandwich from Cranks, puked it up in the bog, had a spat with the French, sent reminders to Harvey Nicks and the new shop in Harrogate. Just the usual.'

And Penny, breathing exasperation into the phone, always came back with, ‘You know exactly what I mean. What did you *do*?’

And so I’d give up. ‘Three and a half.’

‘Not bad for a Tuesday.’

‘Bloody good for a Tuesday. But today’s Wednesday.’

‘Well, not bad for a Wednesday either. What did you say you did?’

‘Three and a half.’

‘And what about Beeching Place?’

‘Just one and a half.’

‘Oh. Still, that’s ... six thousand for the two shops.’

‘Five.’

‘You know I’m no good at fractions. What did you say you did?’

The miracle is that I managed to stay sane for so long.

I suppose when I first went to work for Penny she was pretty good. After all, she’d built *Penny Moss* up from not much more than a market stall into a perfectly respectable business, a business that people had almost heard of, even if they sometimes got us mixed up with Ronit Zilkha, or Caroline Charles or, heaven forfend, Paul Costelloe. Two shops and a wholesale side that had taken off, and was cruising at a comfortable altitude. People had worn our clothes on daytime telly. Penny, conspicuously *without* Hugh had been in *Hello!*. Well, okay, *OK!*. But, as Penny pointed out to anyone who’d listen, it’s got a bigger circulation anyway. A cabinet minister wore one of our suits at the party conference (a coffee tussah silk affair, like a funky-up Chanel) and, for the first time, looked more feminine than her male colleagues. Professional women who want to look chic and chic women who want to look professional wear our clothes. The next time you’re at a wedding look around you. There, amongst the neuralgic pink and monkey-puke yellow, you’ll see our clothes: subtle, perfectly tailored, elegant.

Where were we? Yes, just as we were beginning to make some real money, Penny started to get battier. She’d always had tendencies. Odd flights of fancy, a fondness for viscose. But now she was forgetting things. Losing things. The usual signposts in the foothills of senility. If I sound callous it’s because she’s not *my* mum. She’s Ludo’s. O God! It’s all getting complicated already. I’ll have to set it out straight, or you’ll never catch up.

My name is Katie Castle, and this is the story of how I had everything, lost it all, and then found it again, but not quite all of it, and not in the same form, and, if I’m perfectly frank (which, I have to confess, doesn’t come naturally) not, in every single particular, *quite* so good. The story’s mainly about me, but it also involves, in no special order:

Penny, my employer, the wife of Hugh;

Hugh, the husband of Penny;

Liam, my Big Mistake;

Jonah, who was nearly an even bigger mistake, but who turned out to be a Good Thing;

Veronica, my loyal and faithful servant, up to a point; and

Ludo, who is the adored child of Penny and Hugh and who was, at the very beginning, the point at which you came in, my beloved, my betrothed.

There’re lots of other people as well, friends and hangers-on, but you’ll meet them when you meet them. I’ve decided to be honest, so you might find yourself thinking me a madam or a minx, but even if I do some bad things, and some silly things, you must try to stay on my side, because in the end I turn out to be quite good, I promise.

In the beginning. Like everybody else I live in London. Like almost everybody else, I live in Primrose Hill, the bit of London where Camden stops being horrid and Regent’s Park stops being boring. Like not quite everybody else, but like an awful-lot-of-body-else, I work in fashion. So I’m

not really a designer, but anyone who works in fashion will tell you that the most important person in any fashion company is the production manager. We *all* know that. What's a designer anyway? A tricky East End nonce who knows what to steal and who to screw. Or who to be screwed by. Not even an original thief, but a parasite on parasites. A magpie collecting bits of tinsel other magpies have thieved. Art-school losers too good at drawing to make it as artists, too vain to be teachers, too thick to be anything else. I love them, but I wouldn't want to *be* one. And anyway, we don't really have designers in our company. We have Penny. And Penny has me.

I started in the shop. There was a card in the window: 'Help Wanted. Experience preferred.' Well, I had *experience*. Penny and Hugh interviewed me. I did my trick of being girlie and grown-up at the same time: girlie to Hugh and grown-up to Penny. The shop's on a little lane just off Regent Street. It looks quite small from the front, but it goes on up for ever, stairs winding into the sky. I should say that it starts out as a shop, and then it becomes a studio, where the samples are made, and then at the top it turns into an office. I spend most of my time at the top, with Penny, who goes home at four o'clock every day except Friday, when she goes home at three. That's why she always phones me at five past six to find out how we've done.

The girls in the shop don't like me very much. We all chatter away whenever I drop down to see how things are going, but I know they bitch about me when I'm gone. That's just the way shops are – there's nothing else to do. If it's not the fat bums and flabby tits of the customers, then it's the stupidity and meanness of the bosses, and that sort of includes me. They don't like the way that I skipped upstairs, leaving them behind. They think *I* think I'm too good for them now, which I do, and I am. But our warfare is cold, and mainly takes the form of sulks and obstinacy over rotas.

Things are different with the studio. The problem there is that I have to tell them when things go wrong. I have to make them do things they don't want to do, and then I have to make them do them again. I have to tell them off. Penny is too grand to concern herself with such matters as stretched necks, lumpy zips, badly distributed ease on the sleeve head, sloppy felling, and wavering seams. And that means, of course, that it's me who has to stand there as Tony, our unreliable, temperamental, irascible, but entirely essential sample machinist, throws one of his tantrums, spitting out curses in Maltese and rending pieces of calico to frayed white ribbon. It's me that has to endure the open enmity of Mandy, with her leopardskin pants, and tongue to match.

But I didn't care. And why didn't I care? Because my life was perfect.

A poet died in my square. I read her poems once, but they were all me me me. The flat isn't mine, of course. It's Ludo's. But it felt like mine. I'd *made* it mine. Everything apart from the brick and slate had been chosen by me. Out had gone Ludo's schoolboy clutter – his saggy old armchair; his disgusting family-heirloom curtains; pictures of dead people. So now we had clean lines, a gleaming wood floor, blinds that seemed to make the rooms lighter, rather than darker when they were down. There were always flowers. Ludo hates flowers. 'I'd see the point if you could eat them,' he'd say. His horrible old books were confined to his study – the Smelly Room, I called it.

Ludo. Everybody loved Ludo. He was so helpless. He looked like a completely random pile of clothes, hair, shoes and beer bottles somehow come to life. I tried to do for him what I'd done for the flat, but it didn't take. It was like trying to polish suede. At least I managed to get him to cut his hair, which was something, even if he resented it in that slow-burning way of his.

The really funny thing about Ludo is that he was a teacher. And he didn't even have to be. He could have done all sorts of things, he was so clever. But instead of all sorts of things, he taught English at a school in Lambeth – the kind of school where even the teachers carry knives. I suppose it was some kind of reaction against his parents. Or rather against Penny. He'd spend all night marking in the Smelly Room. He had views about the National Curriculum, but none of our friends ever listened.

Seducing Ludo was easy. I could tell that he liked me because he blushed the first time he met me. I was still in the shop then, and he came in to see Penny. Although it was August he wore a hairy tweed jacket, like a cowpat with arms.

‘Mum in?’ he said to Zuleika, the Lebanese girl who’d been there for years without doing very much, unless you count having lovely skin as doing something. Before she had the chance to answer *I carpe diemed*.

‘She’s lurching with *Vogue*. You must be the genius. I’m Katie Castle.’ Before he knew what was happening I had him out of there and into Slackers winebar. During the first bottle of Pouilly Fumé; we did, in a slow spiral down-wards, his favourite books, his favourite films, his job, his loves, his hates, his inner despair, his aching loneliness, his family. I sighed and nodded, eyes moistening in sympathy. And then, in a textbook manoeuvre, I led him from that dark place and showed him that life could be fun. I joked, I flirted, I sparkled, and we spiralled up through the second bottle, like pearl fishers. I made it seem as though he was doing the entertaining: I laughed at his first jokes, moved closer, bent towards him, touched his arm.

And, you know, it really wasn’t all pretend. Underneath all that hair and cobwebs and mustiness, I found a perfectly nice looking man, with a lovely, shy smile and really quite kissable eyes. Even if he hadn’t been my big chance, I still might have fallen in love with him.

We made it back just before Penny – I was always a good judge of a lunch time. Zuleika was fuming, but that didn’t matter. Penny made her entrance and enveloped Ludo in her customary critical embrace. And instantly, with that famous low cunning of hers, she knew.

‘Darling, have you been getting in the way of the girls?’ she declaimed, and without pause swept Ludo up the stairs to write the cheque. But on his way out, a long, long half-hour later, he asked for my number, and his fate was sealed.

Of course Penny tried to fight it. Penny understood me very well. Because, I suppose, we’re really quite alike. Or could it be that she always thinks the worst of people and the worst, on this one occasion, just happened to be true? I always had an ally in Hugh. Hugh loves women and the prettier they are the more he loves them. And whatever they might say in the shop, or the studio, or anywhere else, I *am* pretty. Hugh always thought I was good for Ludo. ‘You’re good for Ludo,’ he’d say. ‘You bring him out of himself. Stop him from brooding and sulking all the time like a wolf in its lair.’ It became clear that Ludo was a disappointment to him. Hugh was big and bold and successful and confident. He’d sent Ludo to his old school, hoping it would turn him into a copy of himself. Instead poor Ludo emerged broken and resentful. To Hugh and Penny’s despair, and despite insanely good grades, he refused to even *apply* to Oxford, but went instead to some college in Wales, ‘Not even a wretched redbrick,’ as Hugh bemoaned, ‘looks like a Bulgarian nuclear power station.’

It was always hard working out Hugh and Penny as a couple. Hugh was posh, you couldn’t escape that. He had that faint sheen that only posh people seem to carry with them, even into late middle-age. Not like my parents. Not, I suspect, like Penny’s. Penny had been an actress. She would rattle off titles from TV series in the sixties I’d never heard of. She talked about a play. There had been a couple of films. Sean Connery was mentioned, but I never worked out in what connection. She said that she had given it all up for Hugh and Ludo. *Penny Moss* – her maiden name – began as a hobby. She made her own clothes in the sixties – tie-dyed headscarves, crocheted ponchos with matching berets, that sort of thing, I imagine. People liked them. She began to sell them to friends. The next thing she knew she had a Saturday stall in Portobello, just a bit of fun, really. And then the first shop.

All this time Hugh’s enterprises – things in the City, investments, speculations – were starting to ‘go a little stale’ as he put it. And then, sometime in the early eighties, there came a point when *Penny Moss* began to bring in more than he did. Rather than pick up the gauntlet, he capitulated. Drew up the drawbridge and took to golf. Penny used to drag him into the office, occasionally, to help with hiring and firing, but it was more symbolic than anything. He didn’t seem too bothered about it. He’d bought the fabulous house in Kensington. He still had a few investments, and *Penny Moss* was doing nicely. Why work when, again in his words, he could simply ‘live off his hump’?

But this had all led to a power shift in the relationship. And Penny was never one to miss an opportunity. As Hugh retreated, so she advanced. She’d been attractive (I’d seen – who hadn’t? –

the photographs) as a young woman, but as a woman of a certain age, she was a stunner. She went every year to Cannes during the festival, and there were rumours of affairs with the most surprising people. Could Peter Sellers *really* have proposed, one moonlit night on a yacht chartered by the French Minister of Culture? She claimed she kept the ring as a memento, when he refused to take it back. Did Luchino Visconti *really* suggest a spot of troilism with a Scandawegian starlet? Penny used to talk about these things in a wistful sort of way, as though it were something she'd desired rather than achieved, but Ludo's grumpy silence on the subject offered some kind of authentication. I got the feeling that he'd been teased about her at school. I found it hard not to laugh, whether or not the stories were true.

But that's all ancient history. I'll cut to the chase. Ludo was mine, whatever Penny thought about it. We lived together in the Primrose Hill flat, and we were engaged, although Ludo could never quite remember when or how he had asked me to marry him. When it became clear that she could not manoeuvre me out of Ludo's life (she'd tried both blackmail and bribery), Penny had the good sense to draw me up to the office, to avoid the shame of her sweet boy consorting with a shop girl. I was made an assistant to Carol, the previous production manager. But Carol must have known the writing was on the wall and after a week, to everyone's relief, she left to do VSO in Egypt, and was never heard of again. I used to like to think that she'd been eaten by a crocodile. I know that might suggest that I'm a bit lacking in the generosity of spirit department, but I used to be much preoccupied by the question of whether it would be better to be eaten by a crocodile or a shark. Crocodile always seemed more likely, because of Tarzan. You see I could always imagine myself as Jane, whereas sharks mainly seem to eat Australians, and imagining oneself as an Australian is out of the question.

With my new job I soon found that I had new friends. The London fashion world is a small one. There are six people that you have to know. Enter that blessed circle and you will never miss a party, and never brunch alone. If I hadn't quite made it into that circle, I was at least a satellite of a moon orbiting a planet that was part of the circle, and for now, that would do.

And then – could it really be just nine months ago? – came that phone call from Penny, and my usual smart reply. But it was not to end there.

'Katie, darling.' A bad sign, that 'darling'.

'Yes, Penny?'

There's some trouble at the depot. Cavafy says he can't find the right interlining. I know it's there, somewhere. You couldn't go out there tomorrow morning and check for me could you? There's really no one else I can ask. You can do it on your way into work.'

I pulled my Jean Muir face, and hissed out three shits and a fuck. The depot was the worst thing about my job. A hideous warehouse in outer Mile End, full of toiling women whose lives were simply too awful to contemplate. Cavafy was the old Greek who ran the place, with his idiot son, Angel. And the 'on your way into work' was typical Penny. Mile End was no more on my way into work than my arse is on the way to my elbow.

'Don't look like that, Katie,' said Penny, which was clever of her given the miles of phone line between her and my grimace. 'You've got Paris the day after tomorrow to look forward to, and Mile End won't kill you.'

Paris meant *Première Vision* – the world's biggest fabric fair. For the past two years I'd gone along with Penny, as her Girl Friday/translator/minder. It was the polar opposite of Mile End, the good to its bad.

'Anyway,' she added with her characteristic contempt for logic, 'aren't you going to a party tonight? I haven't been to a party for months and I don't complain.'

'What about cocktails at the Peruvian Embassy last Thursday to push vicuna yarn?'

'Darling, that was business and not pleasure. And I still don't know what a vicuna is, which was the main reason I went.'

‘But didn’t you get legless and have to be escorted out for biting a general’s gold braid to see if it was real?’

‘I was only being playful. And he wasn’t a proper general. But he did have such a virile ... moustache.’ The line paused as Penny drifted off into a romantic Latin American reverie involving, or so I imagined, an abduction by the besotted colonel, adventures with wild gauchos, a palace coup, a forced wedding, the adoring crowds, the assassin’s bullet, a coronation ... ‘Anyway,’ continued the Queen Presumptive of Peru, ‘that wasn’t a *real* party. What I want is a party with paparazzi and people I’ve heard of. It’s not for me, you understand: it’s for the good of the company. We need a ... one of those things, you know, a *higher profile*.’

‘Well, why not come tonight then?’ I only said it because I knew she wouldn’t.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Katie. I wouldn’t dream of gate-crashing. And I don’t even know where it is.’ I was a little concerned about the relish with which she pronounced ‘*gatecrashing*’, which suggested that the idea had a wicked appeal.

‘Look, Penny,’ I said, ‘come or don’t come, it’s entirely up to you. But now I have to get home: I haven’t a clue yet what I’m going to wear.’

‘Oh. Okay. And Mile End – you will remember to kiss Cavafy for me, won’t you?’ she said.

‘Of course, Penny,’ I said, suppressing, with an effort that made my eyes water, a jostling crowd of curses and expletives.

[chapter two](#)

[in matching knickerbockers](#)

The party to which Penny had alluded to was a launch at Momo’s. I can’t remember what was being launched – chocolate flavoured vodka or something – it never really matters. Milo, naturally, was doing the PR, and the place was packed with B- and C-list celebs. Not all fashion of course but, given that it was one of Milo’s, there was bound to be a fashionable feel. There were models, a smattering of out-of-favour designers, and a few vaguely familiar telly people from daytime soaps, or early evening quizzes. Milo had clearly been coasting: this really wasn’t his best work. The one real catch was Jude Law, who’d promised to make an appearance in return for the indefinite loan of a Gucci lizardskin jacket.

I was in my element. I have, you see, the sort of face that people think they know: people are always convinced that they’ve seen me on something. And best of all, I knew people in several of the discrete clusters that had formed. That meant I could island hop, moving from one to another as soon as the conversation dulled, which, in the PR-fashion cosmos took on average four and a half minutes.

First, there was Milo’s lot by the bar: that’s Milo himself, PR Queen of London, sleek and wondrously handsome in a black neoprene suit and a pair of piebald ponyskin shoes. Next to him, close as a gun in a holster, there pressed Xerxes, Milo’s Persian Boy. Xerxes was an exquisite miniature, eyes dark and lustrous. Milo said he was a Zoroastrian, a fire worshipper, and that he’d never let him blow out a match, but would make him wait until the flame had eaten all the wood, and licked at his fingers. No one had ever heard him speak. Some said he was dumb. Others disputed his origins. I’d heard, of course, the story about Xerxes being a Bangladeshi waiter, but who knew the truth in this world of rumour, fantasy and Fendi handbags?

Pippin, Milo’s ex, a designer whose name adorned a million pairs of tasselled loafers, hovered close by, although it was hard to work out if his interest was in his old lover, or the Persian Boy, or the barman, or the bar. Pippin was a hard one to like. Pretty, of course, in a high-cheekboned, floppy-haired, pastiche-Eton kind of way – he would never otherwise have kept Milo’s attention for eighteen months. But there was something foetid and creepy about him, as if he’d just pulled himself away from an act of gross indecency with a minor.

Two of Milo’s PR girls fluttered among them. I called them Kookai and Kleavage. Although I always thought of them as essentially the same person, and indeed often mixed them up, there *were* some differences. Physically they weren’t alike at all. Kookai was a pretty little thing, soooo Asian

Babe I could never understand why she wasn't reading the news on Channel Four. Sadly she was also too dumb to realise that all she had to do was ask, and she could drape herself from head to toe in the Prada and Paul Smith samples that lined the office walls back at Smack! PR. Hence Kookai.

Not a mistake that Kleavage was to make. Less naturally attractive than Kookai, with a jaw line perhaps a little too well defined, she was nearly always the best dressed girl in the room. Best dressed and least dressed, showing off her miraculous tits and supermodel midriff. Where Kookai was sheer gush, Kleavage was always more calculating: you could see her working out the angles, searching with those violet eyes for openings ... weaknesses. So different from the broadband PR lovebeam that was Kookai.

I slipped in beside Milo, who was whispering something obscene into the ear of the Persian Boy. He looked at me, frowned for a nanosecond and then kissed me on the lips, sliding in his tongue just long enough to make his point.

'You look amazing,' he said with that luscious, creamy voice of his. The voice had been his making; telesales his first arena; cold calling his *métier*. 'Yes,' you'd have said to the double glazing, 'Yes, yes' to the encyclopaedias, 'O God! Please, yes,' to the financial services, and only ever, perhaps, 'no' to the dog shampoo. And so that fifty thousand stake was his, and Smack! PR born.

The tongue trick worked on most people, throwing them off their stride, giving him an instant advantage.

'Put your tongue in my mouth again you fucking old queen and I'll bite it off,' I replied. It's what I always said.

'Less of the "old",' he said, looking around with theatrical paranoia, 'there are *clients* about.'

We bantered for a little while, with Kookai and Kleavage giggling and trying to join in, Pippin smoking and self-consciously ignoring us, and the Persian Boy lost in his private world of fire, or chicken tikka masala.

'Where's your handsome rustic?' said Milo after a while, miming a telescope. 'Haven't left him back at the flat with an individual pork pie and a work of improving literature, have we?'

Pippin giggled like a girl showing her knickers to the boys for the first time.

I didn't like Milo sneering at Ludo – that was my job, and it's different when you love someone, but I couldn't object without slithering down a snake to the bottom of the board.

'Really, Milo,' I replied quickly, 'surely you know that it's *after* we get married that I start to leave him at home. He's looking for the cloakroom. Could be hours.'

'*After* you're married?' said Milo slyly. 'Have you set a date then? Or are we still in the realms of whim and fancy?'

I wasn't sure if Milo had deliberately passed from teasing into malice, but he had found his way unflinchingly to the nerve.

'Milo, I know you're bitter about never having the chance to be the glorious centre of attention of everyone you know for a whole day, and never getting to wear white, and never having troops of pretty choir boys singing *your* praises, and never having literally hundreds of presents *forced* upon you, and never having a cake with a tiny statue of you on it, but you have to rise above all that.'

Had I gone too far? Milo was famous for his grudges which could lie dormant for years before bursting into poisonous fruit. But no, the operatic look of spite he threw my way was reassuring.

'You can keep the juicer,' he said through pursed lips, 'and just how many Gucci ashtrays do you need? A wedding is a tiny rent in the straight universe that gives you a glimpse of the infinite glory of the camp beyond. I'm there already.'

'Ain't *that* the truth,' said Pippin from the bar.

As soon as I felt Milo's eyes begin to flicker over my shoulder I moved on – talk to any PR for more than five minutes and it'll happen to you. The core of the next group was formed by three models, one posher than princesses, one of the middling sort, and the last born under the chemical cloud that covers Canvey Island, in deepest Essex. Despite spanning the entire range of the English

class structure there were few differences between them discernible to the naked eye: they all smoked the same cigarettes, they all had the same hair, the same black-ringed eyes, the same magnificent bones and here, unshielded by the dotting camera's veil, the same tired skin.

I knew Canvey Island quite well: she'd modelled for us more than once. She had a little more conversation than the other two, but even so it was limited to accounts of her appalling sexual experiences. I always liked her story about losing her virginity at thirteen to a guy with a tight curly perm and pencil moustache, who'd picked her up at a nightclub in Billericay. He started dancing next to her, expertly separating her from her friends, his white slip-on shoes moving like two maggots on a hook. He bought her three sweet martini and lemonades and then led her outside to a Ford Escort van in the car park. He exclaimed 'ta da', and threw open the back doors to reveal a flowery mattress, with a stain the size and colour of a dead dog in its precise centre. He bundled her into the back, fumbling at his stone-washed jeans. Her skirt was up and her knickers off before she knew what was happening. His cock was smaller than a mini-tampon, and so she felt little pain. After four weaselly thrusts he came, yelping out an excited 'fuckfuckfuck.' With a smirk of satisfaction he tied a knot in his condom and chucked it down the side of the mattress, where it joined dozens more. He locked up the van and went back to the club. She went for some chips, and ate them as she walked home.

She was telling the story again to four men strutting and preening around the models. Two were tall and good-looking, two squat and ugly: a footballer, and the footballer's agent, an actor and the actor's agent. The actor had made his name playing East End villains in low budget British gangster films, but a public school drawl kept breaking through the studied cockney. The footballer was famous for biting the testicles of a more talented opponent, and this singular act of brutality had mysteriously given him access to the world of celebrity. I sensed that my presence was desired, and realised at once why – I'd round out the numbers nicely. But I knew I'd be stuck with one of the uglies. Life, like the agents, was too short. And Ludo, of course, was out there, somewhere. I smiled and moved on. Still, the footballer *had* been rather good-looking, decked out by some tame stylist in an Oswald Boateng suit, conventionally, almost boringly, tailored, but showing, when he moved, flashes of brilliant electric-blue lining, like a fish turning on a coral reef.

There were, naturally, endless journos on the lig. I knew most of the fashion writers, 'the clittorati', as Milo called them, as bitchy in the flesh as they are fawning on paper. They were never quite sure what to make of me. They knew that I was oily rag, a production pleb. But they also knew that I was heir presumptive to the *Penny Moss* throne. And, okay, it's Ruritania, and not the Holy fucking Roman Empire, but royalty's royalty, after all.

'Hi Katie. So what are we all going to be wearing next year?' said one, but with a flickering eye that added silently 'as if you'd know'.

'Oh, you're in luck,' I smiled back, 'it's kaftans, kaftans, kaftans.' I pirouetted away without waiting to see if it detonated.

I preferred the non-fashion hacks, honest cynics, eyes peeled for the goody bags and the drinks tray, even if, as one of them slurred into my ear:

'Christ, Katie, we stand out in this crowd like white clots of fat in a black pudding.'

Who else? Ah, the nervous group of execs from the Norwegian Vodka company, terrified in case they've made some dreadful mistake, but completely unaware of what a mistake, or a triumph, would look like. I thought about being nice and talking to them, telling them how well it was going but life, like a Norwegian winter's day, is just too short.

In truth it wasn't going that well. Jude Law had still not appeared. I wondered if Momo had perhaps borrowed the security people from *Voyage* and they hadn't let him in – 'sorry darling, this really is more of a *snakeskin* party'. The free drinks had run out and the journos were quick to follow. I went to find Ludo.

As I'd figure-of-eighted around the room, Ludo had waited patiently in a corner, moving only to reach for the trays of chocolate flavoured vodka, or vodka flavoured chocolate, or whatever, as they floated by. He was hammered, and had turned melancholic.

'Fucking hell, Katie,' he began, the language harmless in his gentle voice, 'you've left me standing here like a cunt all evening.' He'd taken to using the dreaded c-word. He claimed he wasn't trying to shock, but that it was an attempt to reclaim it, like rap artists calling each other nigger. I didn't quite see how that worked, with him being a man, and not a woman, and therefore not having one to reclaim, but I usually let it pass.

'Ludo, you're a grown-up; there are plenty of people here who you know. Why didn't you talk to them?'

'I tried a couple of times. But you know how it is: there's nothing I have to say that would interest them.'

I pictured Ludo explaining some innovative use of a scientific metaphor in the poetry of John Donne to a ditzzy *Marie Claire* stylist, and I felt one of my waves of affection. Perhaps I should have talked to him, or introduced him, or something. But I'd been trying that for aeons, and it never worked. I'd introduce him to someone nice in fashion, or a Channel Five TV director, and he'd bark into their ear about sea eagles and that would be that. And I had to be strict: every couple needs at least one set of teeth between them.

'Oh come on, Ludo. It's not my fault that you've got about as much small talk as a cactus. And you hate fashion people, and anyone trying to sell things, or make money, or enjoy themselves.'

'Then why do you make me come to these bloody things?' The tone was half whine, half grump. *Not* attractive.

'No one made you come, and you know you'd only sulk if I didn't invite you.'

'I should have been marking,' he slurred on. 'I mean, look at these people. What have they got to offer the world? How would the world be a worse place if they were all burnt to death in a tragic airship disaster?'

'But who would organise parties if Milo wasn't around? And who would people take pictures of if there weren't models? Really Ludo, you *are* silly.'

It was then that I noticed it arrive. I've no idea how it managed to pass through the security cordon: perhaps the heavies were shocked into torpor. The 'it' was a beige safari suit, fastened at the front with a mathematically ingenious system of leather laces and eyelets. And at the bottom, ohmygod, there they were in all their obscene glory: the matching knickerbockers, laced with wanton exuberance under the knee. This wasn't seventies revival, oh no. This was seventies pure and simple, served straight up, as she comes, rayon in tooth and claw. It was prawn cocktail, and steak tartare, and Bird's Angel Delight; it was Demis Roussos backed by the Swingle Singers. It was Penny.

The conversation came back to me. Days before in the office Penny had described the suit.

'That's so *in*,' I'd said. 'You *have* to wear it.'

It's the kind of thing you always say when people tell you about the old stuff in their wardrobes.

'Really? Perhaps I will,' she replied, and I tuned out to concentrate on the dancing lines of figures in the costings book.

The problem, the mistake if you like, was the gap between the seventies in the seventies and the seventies now. You see, whenever there is a revival there are always touches, not necessarily subtle, that distinguish it from the real thing. Miss those touches and you look like a children's entertainer. Penny was certainly providing entertainment. Her progress through the party was followed with rapt attention, the very intensity of which somehow drove out the wholly natural laughter reflex. Penny's actressy poise, her wonderfully controlled refusal to glance around her, gave the whole thing something of the flavour of a visit by an aloof Habsburg dowager to a small town in Montenegro.

Ludo saw her too. 'Mum, oh Mum,' he mouthed, and shrank back into the shadows like a schoolboy who knows he's about to be kissed in front of his mates. I was caught between admiration

and horror. How I'd love to have a tungsten ego like that, such a flagrant assumption that my whims were a sure guide to glory. But for now it was good to be on the outside laughing in.

Bloodhound-keen, her nose led her to the bar and, coincidentally, into the middle of Milo and his courtiers. I winced in anticipation of the rebuff she must surely receive: would she perish by fire or by ice? Milo, abetted by his jackals, was adept at both.

Penny began a conversation. I heard the odd phrase - 'Warren Beatty and I ... Prince Rainier ... often at Sandringham ...' above the renewed party hubbub. And miraculously I saw that Penny was dappled with laughter. Milo smiled indulgently on her; Pippin had turned from the bar and was whinnying appreciatively; Kookai and Kleavage coiled themselves like cats around her legs. The explanation was simple: Penny had found her way by chance or instinct to the one place in the party where she would find a receptive audience. You see, as had suddenly become clear to me, Penny was a fag-hag waiting to happen: and her moment had come. Here the absurd miscalculation of her attire was transformed into a camp triumph. Here her curiously masculine femininity could be seen as the playful challenge of the drag queen.

I thought about rejoining the group, but decided that the moment was too perfect to risk spoiling. And anyway, it wasn't fair on Ludo. He looked pleadingly at me and said, 'Please please please, we have to go *now*, before she sees us.'

I kissed my way to the door with Ludo clinging to my hand, and we went to find a taxi. As always, the taxi worked its aphrodisiacal magic on him, but I really couldn't be bothered with it.

And *that* isn't like me at all.

So that's the immediate background to my trip to the depot. It isn't quite true to say that I was in two minds over marrying Ludo. I loved him, by which I mean that whenever I said it or even thought it, it rang true to me, and I never felt that I was pretending. I never thought for a moment of dumping Ludo. Apart from the love thing, there were practicalities: life would be impossible without him. Where would I live? What would I do? My life was built, not around him, exactly, but directly above him. It assumed his continued existence, as a city assumes the continued existence of good drains. Sorry if that sounds unkind, but I'm trying to be honest.

But despite the love, and despite the need, I was still tingling with that faint, unpleasant dissatisfaction that comes when you know you have to do something, and you know that it is for the best, but it means not being able to do lots of other things that you'd really rather like to do. Yes, I was desperate to get married, and frustrated about his dallying over the date. But equally, if I was going to do something naughty, and on balance I thought I probably was, then time was running out.

[chapter three](#)

[cavafy, angel, and the loading bay of doom](#)

The tube was full of the usual freaks, psychopaths, and mutants. It really annoyed me that Penny would never pay for a taxi out to Mile End. She always said, 'but Katie, darling, the tube's so much quicker. And think of the environment, you know, the hole in the rain forest, and whatever it is that's wrong with the ozone layer. Save the whale, and the pandas and things.' She hasn't set foot on public transport since they put the electronic gates in the tube stations, the operation of which proved to be completely beyond her mechanical capabilities.

I say the usual freaks and psychos, but there were actually two rather good ones. One was a woman, normal looking, prim even, but about once a minute her face would convulse and contort into a hideous grimace, as though she'd just found half a worm in her apple. The awful thing is that she obviously knew it was going to happen, and she would try to cover her face with a newspaper, but she was always a split second too late. It was impossible not to stare, not to wait, breath held, trembling with expectancy, for the next fit.

Because of the convulsion lady, I didn't notice Rasputin until a few moments before my stop. Everything about him was long and filthy: his hair, his nails, his smock, his teeth. He had a big rubber torch in his hand, that he kept switching on and off. And he was staring at me. He'd been staring, I

guessed, for the whole journey. I felt myself blushing. 'Please God, let him not speak to me,' I prayed. You see, nutters on the tube are bearable until they speak to you. If they speak to you, you enter a whole new world of pain.

'He's dead. We've killed him.'

That was enough. I got up and walked down to the other end of the carriage. Mercifully we were just coming into the station. I'd never been so pleased to reach Mile End. As I hurried along the platform I glanced back. Rasputin was staring at me through the window, his face pressed to the glass. Over his shoulder I saw, for one last time, the woman's face contort.

It's only a ten minute walk up the Mile End Road to the depot, but it always manages to get me down. People outside fashion think it's all about Milan and catwalks and supermodels. It's only when you find yourself on the inside that you see the sweatshops and the depots, and the dodgy deals, and Mile End.

I hate Mile End. I hate its dreary streets, its horrid little houses, its crappy shops. I hate the people with their cheap clothes and bad hair. I hate the buses in the high street, and the fish and chip shops offering special deals for pensioners. I hate the way it always rains. I hate it because it reminds me of home. I hate it because I know it wants me back.

It's okay – I've stopped now. I promise no more whining about Mile End, which I don't doubt is a fine and noble place, beloved of its denizens, admired by urban historians for its fascinatingly derelict music halls and art deco cinemas, and seen as Mecca by those who worship the Great White Transit Van. The Mile End I rage against is a Mile End of the mind, a metaphor, a symbol. And what is it a symbol for? Well, you'll know when we get to East Grinstead in, oh, I don't know, about another hundred pages.

Back to the depot. The depot is where we store our cloth. 'Depot', believe it or not, is actually too grand a word for what we have. Who would have thought that depot could be too grand a word for *anything*? And what we have is a room, about the size of your average two-bedroom London flat, stuck onto the side of Cavafy's Couture. Cavafy's is a big shed, in which toil four rows of six machinists, middle-aged women with fat ankles and furious fingers. I always make a point of chatting to the machinists as I walk through to our depot. They make jokes about me being a princess, and I suppose I must look like some exotic bird of paradise dropped down into a suburban back garden. I always pause by the woman who sits nearest the door that leads off into our depot. She's probably the last woman in the country to have been called Doris. She must have been born right on the boundary between 'Doris' signifying something sophisticated and classy, cigarette holders and champagne flutes, and it meaning 'look at me, I clean other people's houses for a living, and I wear special stockings to support my varicose veins, and my hair will always smell of chip fat, and I will never be happy, or fulfilled, or loved'.

'How's that chap of yours then, my love?' she said, her fingers never pausing as she worked her way along a seam.

'Oh, you know men,' I replied, smiling and shrugging.

Doris shrieked with laughter, as if I'd just come out with the joke of the century. As she laughed her fibrous hair, the texture of asbestos, moved as a piece. Her dress, a grey-white polyester, sprayed with pink flowers of no particular species, picked up I guessed from the local market, having failed C&A quality control, would have looked almost fashionable draped over a girl half her age and weight.

'Men! Oooo men!' she cooed, as if she'd sampled them all, from lord to serf, and not just the abusive, hunchbacked railway engineer who'd stolen away her, in truth rather easy, virtue, twenty-six long years ago, and left her with the baby and no teeth. 'But you've a good un there you know. And I says when you've a good un, you ang on in there.'

I blushed a little and looked around. Cavafy was in his office – a glass-fronted lean-to affair at the other end of the factory. Angel was there too. Angel was, is, Cavafy's son. He loves me.

Everybody loved Cavafy. He's one of those tiny old men you just want to hug. I'd never seen him without his brown lab coat, with at least six pens crammed into the breast pocket. I think he rather hoped something would happen between Angel and me. He'd invite me into the office for a coffee, and embarrass the poor boy by listing his many accomplishments '... and the high jump ... only a small one, but the jumping, the jumping he could do.... And the running. And the GCSEs, look, we have them all on the wall, see, in frames: geographia, historia, mathematica, only a D, but a D is a pass.'

But Angel, Angel. Years ago, when I was still in the shop, I'd come up here to the depot to help schlep stuff around. Angel had just started working for his father. He'd trained as an accountant, without quite passing his exams. I shouldn't really have called him Cavafy's idiot son. That was ungracious and unnecessary. In fact we used to have a bit of a laugh together: he'd make fun of Cavafy, and I'd make fun of Penny. Tight curly hair, fleshy lips, really rather good-looking, except for the height thing. Angel, you see, was a good three inches shorter than me. And that really wouldn't do.

It all came to a head one afternoon when I was sorting through some rolls of linen for a remake on that season's bestselling outfit: an oyster duster coat that would fall open to reveal a tight sheath in a pale pearly grey to match the coat's luscious silk-satin lining. Even doughy-fleshed, big-boned County girls became simpering Audrey Hep-burns (such was the *Penny Moss* magic recipe). Suddenly I felt a presence. I turned round and Angel was close enough for me to smell the oil in his hair and pick out individual flecks of dandruff. He didn't say anything: he just had a look of utter determination in his eyes, and I could see his jaw was rigid with fear or anxiety or lust.

'Angel!' I said breezily, determined to avoid a confrontation. 'How about a hand with this stuff. It weighs a ton.'

But Angel still stood there, straining forwards, apparently unable to move his feet.

'Angel, you're being silly,' I said, beginning to feel uncomfortable. And then he reached out and put his hairy hand on my bottom, where it stuck clammily to the pale silk. Somehow I knew that this wasn't intended as a gross sexual assault and I never felt my virtue was at stake: Angel simply couldn't get the right, or indeed any, words out and his mute gesture was his only way of expressing his feelings. Had his pass been verbal, I would have been happy to parry verbally. But it wasn't and so I felt that there was only one way to bring the incident to an end. And anyway, I suspected that Angel's hand would leave the damp print of his palm and fingers on the skirt, and that annoyed me. So I slapped him.

I'd never slapped anyone before: it always seemed like such a pointlessly feminine gesture, an admission that you haven't the wit to inflict a more serious injury. Almost as soon as I'd done it, I regretted the act (and I certainly had cause to regret it later). Angel took his hand off my bottom and put it slowly to his cheek. A fat, oily tear built in the corner of his eye and rolled down his face until its way was blocked by the broad fingers, whereupon it found some subterranean passage and disappeared. Still without saying a word, Angel turned and walked away.

Boys don't understand how hard it is to break a heart. They think we have it easy, dispensing joy or misery with a nod or shake of the head, as they cavort around us, offering themselves for humiliation. But you really have to be a complete bitch to derive any pleasure out of kicking some hapless youth in the teeth. In fact the only thing worse than having to reject a boy is having no boy to reject at all.

Anyway, after a few minutes I went out to apologise to Angel. I liked him, and I didn't want things to be awkward. I saw that he was in the office. Cavafy had his arm around him. He looked at me blankly, and made a slight shooing gesture when I began to walk towards them.

It was shortly after the Angel incident that it all began with Ludo, and for one reason or another it was a couple of months before I went back to the depot. On that first post-Ludo visit, Angel was nowhere to be seen, and Cavafy stood silent and stony faced in his office, staring icily through the plate glass. Even Doris sat aloof, and barely returned my smile. Penny must have told Cavafy. The two

of them had known each other for decades. The old Greek had made her first collection. Although Penny had moved on to bigger and better things she would still send him the docketts for fifty or so skirts, or a couple of dozen jackets, for old time's sake. I can imagine what kind of spin Penny put on it: Katie the gold digger; Katie the counter-jumper; Katie who thinks she's too good for your son; Katie servant of Beelzebub; Katie mistress of the secret arts; Katie who suckles her cat familiar with her third teat; that sort of thing.

But I toughed it out (and in truth it wasn't *that* tough, bearing in mind that everything else in my life was starting to go so well) and it seemed that things had blown over. After a couple of months you'd hardly have known about the crisis, except for the sullen yearning you sometimes saw in Angel's eyes, and, if I'd been more perceptive, something colder in Cavafy's.

I sensed the sullen yearning thing as I slipped by Doris and through the door into the depot. It didn't take me long to sort out the interlining: it was hiding under a roll of wool crêpe. The depot has an exit out to the loading bay, and I didn't fancy going back through the factory, with Angel moping at me. The exit leads on to a ramp, and, as you know, heels hate ramps, so I usually sat at the top with my legs dangling over the edge, and let myself down the few extra inches. I was just doing that when something emerged from the shadows.

'Give you a hand there, Katie,' came a voice, the type of gorgeous, Irish voice that just cries out to be called 'lilting', and bugger the clichés. I managed to feel both startled and soothed at the same time. A face followed the hand out of the shadows. It was vaguely familiar.

'Do I know you?' I asked, harshly, trying hard to mask the fact that I had been caught by surprise.

'Sure you do. I'm Liam ... Liam Callaghan. I drove for you last year at the London Designer Show.'

Thaaaat was it. Normally I'd go with the clothes, helping to set up the stand, arranging the stories – a story, by the way, for you fashion know-nothings out there, means that part of a collection made out of the same cloth – and all that, but last season I went in the car with Hugh, and he insisted on stopping off at his club for a G & T, which turned into about seven, and by the time we got to the stand all the work had been done. Penny was furious, but didn't say much because it was all Hugh's fault. I just managed to catch Liam as he was leaving, an empty clothes rail balanced on each shoulder. As he'd passed me he'd half turned and thrown me a wink, which was naughty.

'Oh, hello, yes, Liam. Of course. What are you doing skulking back here?'

'Skulking's a little harsh now, isn't it? What could be a more natural habitat for your common or garden van driver than a factory loading bay?'

He had a point, although the 'common or garden' bit was fooling nobody, as he well knew. Although I'd only come across him that one time, I knew that Liam Callaghan drove for almost every designer fashion company in London. He was reliable, hard-working, relatively honest, and heterosexual. In the fash biz any one of those would have set him apart: taken together it meant you had to book him weeks in advance. And yes, Liam was something of a looker, in an almost caricatured Irish-rogue kind of way: dark curly hair, blue eyes, a long face that had a suggestion of melancholy about it, you know, as if he'd just finished playing a piano concerto, until he wheeled out his smile. And that was some smile: a smile that could stop trains. And hearts. It was a smile he must have worked on in front of the mirror. It began, like all the great smiles, with the eyes: a barely perceptible widening, followed by an irresistible crinkling. And then the lips would purse for a moment before collapsing exuberantly into a lovely white roller coaster.

'Well, are you going to give me a hand down or will I have to leap and sprain my ankle?'

He gave me a smile for that: not an all-guns-blazing, blow-your-knickers-off special – perhaps just a 7.5 on the Richter scale of smiles. But it made me want to bite him, for all that.

He was strong and lithe: not a pumped-up gym-fairy strong, but a lifting, shifting, working, strong. His hand stayed in mine for a second or two after I landed.

'Are you going back into town?' I asked.

‘I am that. Do you need a ride?’

‘Mmm. Anything’s better than the tube. Even a smelly old van cab, with fag ends on the floor and porno mags under the seat. I know what you drivers are like.’

‘Well, you know, you could always give it a wee tidy for me, if you’ve a mind.’

The van, of course, was spotless. He opened the door for me, and again offered me his hand, saying, ‘This is habit forming.’

Despite the traffic, the drive back into town was fun. We joked about all the appalling old dragons he had to work for: the cranky, tight-fisted Elland sisters, who’d always make him show his hands were clean before he was allowed to touch any of their precious hats; Emelia Edwards, who’d once actually *pinched* him for eating an orange, for which fruit she had a notorious aversion; Kathryn Trotter, who wouldn’t let any of her actual employees carry Kathryn Trotter bags, as they simply could not convey the right image.

‘And Penny Moss?’ I asked.

‘Wouldn’t say a word against the lady. Fierce as two ferrets in a bag, but never rude unless provoked. And always pays her bills on time. And I’d hardly say otherwise when you’re set to marry the precious boy now, would I?’

‘I wouldn’t tell.’

‘Well maybe you would and maybe you wouldn’t. And how do you feel about getting wed? All a-tingle?’

‘I’m slightly past the tingle stage.’

‘Second thoughts?’

‘I can’t quite see how that’s any of your business.’

‘I’m only making polite conversation, am I not?’

‘Of course I haven’t got second thoughts. Everybody loves Ludo. He’s a honey.’

‘And you’re the bee.’

When you thought about it, that was really rather a horrid thing to say. But he said it with such a charming twinkle that I didn’t mind.

‘Won’t you miss all the parties and suchlike, when you’re wed?’ he continued.

‘What do you mean, miss them? Why should I stop going to parties?’

‘Ah, there’s no reason under the sun. But when did you last meet a married couple at a fashion shindig? Isn’t it all single people, or boyfriends and girlfriends. There’s something about the married state that leads you on to quiet nights by the telly, and Ovaltine before bed. And that’s before we even start talking about the kids. No, let’s give you a couple of quiet years first, then the time of chaos with the children – let’s say you have two, a couple of years apart, and they stay like millstones round your neck till they’re eighteen and they go off to college. Well that’s twenty-two years before you’re clear of the last of them. And then you might be in the mood for a party, but who the hell’s going to invite you then?’

I laughed, but it sounded hollow even to me.

‘If you knew me better you’d realise that nothing could stop *me* going to parties. Anyway, it’s my job. How else could I know who was wearing what, or who was wearing who? How could I keep up with the scandal and gossip? My life isn’t going to end when I get married.’

‘But some things will have to stop now, won’t they, Katie?’ He unfurled a smile. It was simply impossible not to smile back.

There was no way he could have known about my one or two little flirtations. And you’re not going to like this, but I had, it’s true, been thinking about one, last, final, meaningless, harmless little fling before settling down in utter and complete faithfulness with Ludo. The idea had half formed itself in my mind. I knew it was there. It nudged and winked at me. And without explicitly acknowledging its presence, it became part of me, and I knew that I was going to do it.

But who with? No one in my circle. The best looking men were, naturally, gay. The sexiest men were married – and I may be naughty, but I'm not *bad*. No, it had to be an outsider. There was the aforementioned Divine Dante, who always put chocolate on my morning latte, (which I always spooned off with a shudder back in the office). Handsome, in that baby-Vespa way that Italians have. But really, no. I thought about Max from Turbo Sports next door but one. I once saw him, glistening with sweat, at the gym. Body hard as a pit bull terrier. He had the cold eyes of a serial cat-strangler, which I rather liked. So different from lovely, helpless Ludo. But again, no: his head was too small, and he conversed principally in grunts and lewd gestures. There was always the queer little man who came in to fix our Mac whenever it crashed. He once gave me a big, embarrassing sunflower. But beware geeks bearing gifts, as I always say.

So it went with all of the men I met: too old, too silly, too ugly, too gay, too small, too close, too far.

'What does your girlfriend think about you working with all these glamorous fashion women?' I asked, shamelessly.

'And what makes you think I've got a girlfriend? Could I not be a sad, melancholy soul, drifting forlorn and loveless through life?'

'No,' I said.

'As it happens I am between girlfriends at the moment, which is saving me a fortune in roses, but costing me one in Guinness.'

'I hate Guinness,' I said. 'Tastes like old-man's bile to me.'

'Well, you see it all depends on where you drink it and ...'

'Who you drink it with?'

'I was going to say how it's poured. But now you mention it ...'

'There's a rather good Irish word I've heard occasionally.' I said, sweetly, 'Gobshite.' For the first time he laughed. The laugh was less studied than the fabulous smile, but lovelier for it.

'Gobshite is it? Will you look at the tongue on her! She'll be calling me an auld bollix soon.'

'So where should I be drinking Guinness?'

'The only place for a pint of slow-poured black stuff, amid convivial company, with your ears caressed by the finest fiddle playing, is the Black Lamb in Kilburn.'

'Kilburn. Is that where you live then?'

'Not every Irishman lives in Kilburn, you know.'

I did know. About half the people you meet at parties are Irish: Emerald Tiger types, fresh out of Harvard Business School or journalism college, sleek, clever, ambitious. The girls are all beautiful, if a touch wholesome and buttery, and the boys are all puppy-faced and eager. They'd no more live in Kilburn than I would. Of course I'd been to the Tricycle Theatre a couple of times, dragged by Ludo. Once we saw a version of some Brecht play performed by Eskimos. The second time was less commercial. The whole show consisted of a man buried up to his neck in a heap of broken watches, screaming, 'It's later than you think! It's later than you think!' Give me *Cats* any day. Even Ludo agreed we shouldn't go back after the interval.

I looked out of the window and caught a glimpse of myself in the wing mirror. I'd just had my highlights done at Daniel Galvin's. I always think I look better in bad mirrors, caught in movement or glanced at an angle. Unless you're obviously at one end or the other of the spectrum, it's impossible to really know how attractive you are. Models know they're gorgeous. They might pretend to be riddled with doubt, but that's just them trying to seem cleverer than they are. And people with hare-lips and things. I suppose they must know that they're ugly. Sorry, sorry – beautiful on the inside, I'm sure, but, whatever you might say, ugly on the outside. Actually, in my experience ugliness does something horrid to the soul. Knowing that whoever you're talking to can only think 'God, but she's ugly', must burn into you like acid. Unless you're especially stupid. Which makes it all the sadder that pretty people are so often dim, and ugly ones clever. (I know it's a cliché, but clichés get to be clichés

because they're true. Sometimes, anyway.) Hugh once gave me a very good piece of advice. I don't know where he got it from. 'Katie,' he said, 'always tell pretty girls that they're clever, and clever girls that they're pretty. They'll love you forever.'

'And what do you say if they're pretty and clever?' I asked.

He smiled and patted me on the bottom. 'You say yes, Katie. You say yes.' Naughty man.

But I'm drifting off my point. Which was, unless you're at the extremes, you really don't know where you are. And I thought, as I looked at myself in that wing mirror, 'Are you pretty, Katie? Or are you plain? If you're pretty, how pretty? If plain, how plain?' I'd always had boyfriends, and men to tell me that I was pretty, or better than pretty. But men lie. And even the ones that didn't lie, who believed it, did they *know*, were they *right*? If you get the devotion of some poor simpleton who thinks that because you don't buy your clothes from a shop with two letters with an '&' in the middle you must be pure class, does that count? Any man will say he loves you, any man will say you're beautiful when he has a fistful of your knickers and his nose in your Wonderbra. Girls know, of course. We can cast our cold eye over each other. But knowing that girls think you're pretty is like drinking alcohol-free wine, or decaffeinated coffee: it just doesn't hit the spot. No, what we want or at least what I want, is for men to find us, me, beautiful, and for them to be *right*.

But after all that I think I know what the truth is. The truth is that I am *quite* (a lovely word that can mean 'really quite a lot' or 'not really very much at all') pretty. I'm not very tall, perhaps about five six. I'm slim, but not, by anyone's reckoning, skinny. My hair is naturally a dark brownish-yellow, the colour, as Ludo once said, not *meaning* to be horrid, of a nicotine-stained finger. Hence the highlights. My eyes are grey, which is good. I have no eyebrows, which is sometimes good and sometimes bad. My eyelashes are too pale to be of any use, and so I have them dyed. The second time we slept together, Ludo lay gazing into my face. 'your eyelashes,' he said, his breath heavy with wine and cigarettes, 'they're amazing. They're so dark and long! I love them, and your eyelids and your eyes and your face and your head and your everything.' I didn't have the heart to tell him. I still haven't. It's one of the things Penny thinks she has over me. My breasts are small enough not to embarrass me in the world of fashion, and big enough not to embarrass me in the world of men. And all the bits in between? O God! Who knows?

My point is, and I know I've come the long way round, that I'm a good-looking girl, but not good-looking enough to be blasé, not good-looking enough not to need the glances, the praises, the presents, the adulation, the worship, the flattery, the fawning of men. You see, what makes me interesting is that I'm close enough to be able to reach out and grab these things, these meaningless, gaudy, pointless baubles, but too far away for them to drop into my lap.

And now I was reaching, foolish, foolish, girl, for the bauble that was Liam Callaghan, van driver, Irish blarney-merchant, borderline beautiful boy.

'Your Black Lamb doesn't sound like the kind of place a girl could just wander into on her own.'

'Ah Jesus there's plenty of girls come into the Lamb, but it's true enough none at all like you. A good-looking lady by herself might attract a bit of attention, but then you wouldn't have to be by yourself.' It was coming. 'You know if ever you wanted a taste of the dark stuff – the real thing mind you – then I could show you the place. It might be the making of you.'

I have no idea how serious he was up to this point. Was he just playing the Irish rogue to pass the time on our way into town, his mind in neutral? Was this just a diversion? The bluff, if bluff it was, about to be called.

'Okay.'

'Okay what?' I noted with pleasure that he was a little taken aback.

'Okay, why don't you show me what a good pint of Guinness looks like.'

Now there was no smile at all.

'When can you come?'

‘Today’s Wednesday, isn’t it? I’m in Paris from Thursday through till Sunday. How about a week tomorrow?’

That ‘I’m in Paris’ was precious. Thank heavens for *Première Vision*.

‘Thursday week it is then. What if I meet you in the pub at, say, eight o’clock?’

I suddenly felt giddy. Was I in control? I thought I had been. But here I was, agreeing to meet an almost complete stranger, in a desperate pub in Kilburn, a part of London I knew about as well as I knew the courtship rituals of the white-tailed sea eagle.

‘Jesus, look it’s Regent Street,’ said Liam. ‘Why don’t you leap out here?’

‘Thanks for the lift,’ I said.

He said nothing, but looked at me and smiled. It was like being overwhelmed by a warm Caribbean wave: giddy, intoxicating, engulfing, fatal.

[chapter four](#)

[a technical interlude, concerning leases, and the provenance of penny](#)

I cannot say that my endeavours that afternoon represented the triumph of the production manager’s art. Whatever Penny might think about me, she knows that I work hard and efficiently. Being good at anything is all about focus, filtering out the white noise. Ludo told me once that some scientists had done an experiment where they monitored the eye movements of different types of chess players, you know, Grand Masters or whatever they’re called, and ordinary chess-club hopefuls, with tank tops and dirty cuffs. The really great players, it turned out, spent all of their time scrutinising just a couple of squares – the ones that really mattered. The eager amateurs, on the other hand, roamed busily over the whole board, eyes feverishly darting from square to square, in search of the secret, the code that they would never crack.

Ludo, of course, was useless at chess. He was too soft-hearted; he could never bear to lose a piece, and could no more sacrifice a pawn than he could drown a puppy in a sack. Not that I used to play him. His chum, Tom would come round, and they’d disappear into the Smelly Room with the board and a bottle of whiskey.

No, that afternoon I couldn’t focus at all. My eyes were all over the board. Or off it altogether. I oscillated wildly between the fear of what I was getting myself into, and a bubbling, uncontrollable excitement. Sitting at my desk I found myself, amazingly, turned on. I crossed my legs and thought of Ireland.

I could tell Penny was getting annoyed: she kept making a little noise, that began as a tut and ended in a grunt. Her mind was turning slowly as she tried to find something to throw at me. I pictured an ox tied to one of those big grindy things they have in Biblical epics.

‘Katie,’ she called, slyly from her place under the skylight, ‘have you spoken to Liberty yet about the reorder? We have to let them know today.’

‘You know I haven’t. Couldn’t you have done it while I was at the depot?’ I didn’t normally bite back at Penny but, as I say, I was elsewhere.

‘No, Katie you dear thing.’ Ouch! One of the things I remember from ‘A’ level English was that in Restoration comedies whenever the level of explicit courtesy rises you know a sword is being drawn somewhere beneath a frock coat. Penny was like that. ‘Lady Frottager came in drunk and peed on the ottoman.’

‘What, *again*?’

‘Yes, *again*.’

‘Someone,’ I said in a half-conscious echo of Penny’s own *grande dame* manner, ‘ought to tell that woman our ottoman is not a public convenience.’

‘Well anyway, she was terribly distressed, and I had to comfort her until the taxi came.’

‘Did she buy anything?’

‘I coaxed her into one of the pashminas but that’s hardly the point. And then that ugly brute Kuyper came a-calling.’

‘Still banging on about the rent rise?’

‘Without a ... a ... bazooka, there is simply no stopping that man.’

Kuyper, a South African who’d learnt his social skills as a torturer under apartheid (well, he might have), really was a brute. His company, Kuyper and Furtz, had bought the freehold on our shop, and three other units in the lane, one of which was empty and officially cursed after a string of businesses had tried, and failed, to sell, in order, posh bras, camping equipment, cameras and, inevitably, candles.

The first thing Kuyper and Furtz did was to invite the utterly pointless Anita Zither, who was currently between retail outlets, into the empty unit. Pointless, because despite being the press’s darling, and the establishment’s pet English designer, she’s never managed to put together a collection anyone would want to wear or buy, and every two years she goes bust, owing her suppliers tens of thousands. The day after she’d signed her lease, Kuyper came to us claiming that she was paying three times the rent we were. And there it was, in black and white. As it was time for our rent review, this spelled serious trouble. Kuyper ranted on about market rates, his bullet head and fat neck glowing red with greed, his fat finger pointing away, like a school bully bursting balloons. We couldn’t afford anything like what he was asking, and nor, surely, could Anita Zither.

The next day we got at the truth. One of Anita’s girls was an old bitching partner of Nester, our rather stately manageress. They went off for a coffee, and word came back of the dastardly scheme. The enormous rent existed only on paper. The Anita Zither shop was to be given a two-year rent holiday. After that she could renegotiate something more realistic, or just do her usual evaporating trick. The bogus agreement was the perfect stick for beating the rest of us into submission.

Penny, tough cookie that she is, stonewalled, and Kuyper became more and more aggressive, issuing all kinds of threats, legal and physical, and cursing in Afrikaans.

(Sorry if that was all a bit drab and technical, what with leases and freeholds and things, but it wasn’t completely irrelevant, as you’ll see later. Look on it as being like the half talky bits in operas that fill in between the nice songs, the recitative I think it’s called. Ludo took me to see *The Marriage of Figaro* when we were first seeing each other. I read the programme, which went on for pages. Too many notes.)

Back to Penny and her mood.

‘Sorry I wasn’t here to help.’ Conciliation seemed a good idea. ‘I’ll call Liberty’s now.’

‘No need to apologise, I *am* one-third American, after all,’ she said, as if that explained everything.

There was a pause, as I did a quick calculation.

‘Can you be a third *anything*? Doesn’t it have to go in halves and quarters and eighths, and things?’

‘Of course you can. I’m one of three children. My mother was an American. And everyone knows that American flows through the female line.’

‘Isn’t that Jewishness?’

‘Ah, no, you see, *I’m* two sevenths Jewish, as well.’

And so the afternoon passed.

Paris meant an early start, and so I was *quite* pleased that nothing was happening that night: not a dinner party, not a launch, not a soiree, not drinks, not clubbing, not anything. Ludo always loves it when there’s nothing to do: he bumbles about making silly remarks, giving me pointless, spontaneous cuddles. He’ll find a way of nuzzling the back of my neck, and unless I’m *very* discouraging, he’ll end up carrying me to the bedroom. No, at home I really couldn’t ask for a sweeter boy. It’s the social world he can’t cope with; my world.

But Ludo’s lack of engagement with my world wasn’t why I was contemplating the mad, bad thing. You’re probably wondering what reason there *could* be. Here I was with a good man; not perfect, but good. Perhaps even very good. Kind, handsome(ish), and just about rich enough. Yet I

was setting out on a course that could lead only to disaster. You despair of me, I know. I suppose I'd better try to explain.

It's all to do with the trouble with people, the fact that all of the different bits of them are connected up. I don't just mean the knee bone connected to the thigh bone and all that. I mean the different bits of their personality. If you try to get rid of one bit, a bad bit, say Penny's towering self-regard, you find that it's attached to a piece of string, and you pull and pull at the piece of string and then out pops some other bit, a good bit, that you don't want to get rid of at all, like Penny's drive. People come all jumbled together, and you know you're supposed to accept them or walk away, although of course there's always the fashion option of smiling to their faces whilst deftly sinking a stiletto between their shoulder blades.

And so, you see, Ludo's good bits - all the loveliness stuff - were joined up with the bad bits. And one particular bad bit buzzed away in my mind, like a bluebottle at the window. It *really* wasn't the social misfit business. It wasn't the mess. It wasn't the obsessions with things that nobody else cared about - the plight of the white-tailed sea eagle, or the rights of reindeer-herding nomads in the wastes of Finland. It wasn't the brooding or the sulking whenever I did anything a teeny-weeny bit naughty, like putting a CD back in the wrong case, or the case back on the shelf -sin of sins - *out of alphabetical order*. It wasn't the way he sometimes licked his plate before putting it in the dishwasher. It wasn't his habit of tweaking distractedly at his crotch whenever he was nervous, although we *are* getting a little warmer.

No, the problem was that Ludo, lovely, helpless, hapless Ludo just didn't have the sexiness gene.

And now you want me to define my terms. Ludo's always telling me to do that - it's another of his annoying habits. The only way to shut him up is to say 'well, define define, then', a trick I learnt at school for dealing with clever boys. But sexiness is strange, and you really do have to say what you mean. Or at least say what you like.

For me, being sexy isn't just about being good-looking, although it is, whatever anyone else might tell you, at least *partly* that. Sorry nine-tenths of the boys out there. And it certainly hasn't got anything at all to do with being *nice*. Sorry Ludo. Or buying you presents. And I think you know what's coming here. Anyone who's ever read a romantic novel from Jane Austen to Judith Krantz knows what I'm about to say. So get ready for a splash-down in the wide and welcoming sea of cliché - originality is not my aim, but that odd fish, truth. Yes, what we're looking for is our old friend the 'element of danger'. Not take-you-down-an-alleyway-and-slap-you-silly danger. More the knowledge that the object of your interest could go off with someone else more or less whenever he felt like it. More that you see the shape of a sneer behind a smile. More that you don't know what you'd find if you went through their pockets.

I knew exactly what I'd find if I went through Ludo's pockets, not that I bothered to, any more: two handkerchiefs, both as crunchy as Quavers; a tube ticket from a month ago; the chewed top of a cheap biro; a used plaster, screwed up into a ball; a poem, scrawled on a tissue; and a paperback by someone you've never heard of, with a name like Zbignio Chzeznishkiov.

There. I'm a stock character from fiction: the silly girl who, not content with the respectable young man she can have, wants to inject a bit of risk in her life. But fiction makes us what we are; we live in worlds densely populated by characters dreamed up by writers or film directors, or magazine editors, characters more real than the insubstantial ghosts that swarm past us in the street, or drive by in cars, or hang like carcasses in the tube. Often when we think we are being most ourselves, it turns out that our words, our actions, even our thoughts, have been given to us. Sorry, I'm raving.

Anyway, on that evening, however, something like contentment reigned in our household. We had a lovely time, tutting over the soaps, and wincing at *ER* (it was the one where Doug Ross saves a boy from drowning in a land drain, surely the best ever).

At about eleven I made some remarks about having to pack. Ludo said something stupid about that not taking long. Boys just don't have a clue about girls and packing. There are things that we need

that they don't even know *exist*. It takes Ludo from thirty to forty-five seconds to pack, depending on how long it takes him to extract his socks from yesterday's trouser legs. We didn't make love, but we kissed, properly kissed, and I went to sleep thinking about all the wonderful things there are in the world to buy, and how most of them were waiting for me in Paris.

[chapter Five](#)

[visceral couture](#)

The Eurostar left at nine thirty. That meant up at six thirty, tea in bed till seven, bath till seven thirty, dress and targing till eight fifteen, quarter of an hour to collect myself, leave at eight thirty, tube down to Waterloo, get there by five past nine, just late enough to send Penny into fits, but leaving, in the real world, plenty of time to check in and board by quarter past nine.

I dressed comfortably for travelling, in a Clements Ribeiro, and my second favourite pair of JP Todds. There was the inevitable quick panic before I left, and I had to run to the station, wrestling with my smart new Burberry. Even worse, I was forced to finish my make-up on the tube, which always makes me feel like a slut.

I met Penny by the Eurostar check-in. As usual she was sowing chaos around her, pushing where she should be pulling, gesticulating at strangers, and snapping at Hugh, who'd come along to see her off - with, I don't doubt, a heavy sigh of relief.

As ever, her look hovered somewhere between magnificence and absurdity, generally keeping just on the right side of the border. This time she was doing her film star travelling incognito number, in dark glasses and a mad Pucci scarf, which helped to draw the eye away from the truly magnificent full-length sable coat. She had somehow inherited or otherwise acquired the coat from Hugh's side of the family, and such was its luxuriance that nobody ever suspected that it was real. The overall effect was very Sophia Loren.

Hugh kissed me hello, and then quickly again for goodbye. Penny managed a condescending peck on the cheek, acknowledging that our Paris trips were not quite work, and not quite play.

The drama reached something of a peak on the way up to the platform. There was the usual choice between squishy lift, and jostly escalator. As the lift queue seemed to be full of Belgians, Penny decided to go for the escalator, a device she habitually shunned. Big mistake. She clung to the rail as though the escalator were a tiny ship caught in a tempest.

'My feet, Katie,' she cried, 'my feet! What do I do with them? Where do they go?'

'Just close your eyes and pretend it's a normal stair,' I said, colouring at the attention we were attracting. 'O God, let me ... hang on ... just put that ... and that one there.'

People were looking round. The Belgians in the lift queue pulled Magritte faces, and pointed with umbrellas.

And then it stopped.

Stuttered.

And then stopped.

'We'll asphyxiate!' yelled Penny, illogically. 'Come on, we must go back.'

By this stage we were halfway up, and there must have been fifty people crammed in behind.

'Penny, we can't!' I tried feebly.

But Penny had switched from helpless panic mode, to all-action hero. She swept around, through, or over the hapless travellers, who were all waiting patiently for the wretched machine to get going again. She was like one of those ships that smash through the arctic pack ice on the way to pointless expeditions. First Woman to reach the North Pole without Sanitary Protection sort of thing. I followed shamefaced but, as so often with the indefatigable Penny, not a little admiring.

The lift doors opened just as we reached the foot of the escalator. Penny hesitated not one second, but barged straight in, past the bemused Belgians, waving an arm, and saying, in a tone that forbade any argument, 'Excuse me, this is an emergency. We are designers. I am Penny Moss.'

A Eurostar lackey bowed. Honestly, he did. He may, of course, have been drunk.

Things settled down a little once we found our seats, and within twenty minutes Penny was relaxing into her second glass of champagne, as Kent or Sussex, or whatever it is, slid by in a happy green and brown blur.

I was facing the wrong way, of course. Penny always liked to see where she was going. But I didn't really mind. I've always thought - and pay attention here, because this is about the only profound thought I've ever had - I've always thought that life is like facing the wrong way on the train. Because, you see, the present, the bit of countryside that's exactly equal to where you are, is over before you know it's there, and then all you have is the dwindling afterwards of it. And though you can guess what sorts of things are going to come rushing over your shoulder, because you can see roughly what sort of terrain you're in, there's always the chance of something *really* unexpected or scary, like a tunnel, or a field with horses, or Leeds.

Oh. I always thought it would look better when I wrote it down. Perhaps I just can't do profound.

'Interesting young man, that Milo,' said Penny, between sips. In the rush I'd forgotten about her dramatic appearance at the party. 'He said that he would also be in Paris, which was an amusing coincidence. He seemed so sensitive, so ... attentive.'

'That's the way of the PR, Penny. He probably had you down as a potential client.'

'Oh no, I really don't think his interest was professional. I really am rather afraid I may have made another of my tragic conquests.'

I choked on a complimentary peanut.

'But, Penny, you must realise that Milo ...' And then I stopped. This was really too delicious. Milo was going to love it. 'You must know that Milo is terribly, um, confused ... shy ... vulnerable.'

'Yes, I sensed it. And you feel I would be simply *too much woman* for him in his present state? Of course, of course. Not that I would ever stray; it's been so long now. But there's no law against dreaming,' she said wistfully, her fingers pulling at the hem of her skirt. 'And I do so feel for the poor boy, torn between the fatal intensity of possession and the emptiness of loss.'

Already the journey was living up to expectations.

Champagne for Penny was a time machine and eventually Milo was left behind and we found ourselves back in the sixties. Exactly which bit of the sixties was hard to work out, and Penny never specified, as that would have given away too much. I suspect it was a largely imaginary place, a sixties of the mind, a distillation of different times, combining late fifties debutante innocence with the lollipopcoloured, country-house drug scene of '69.

First, of course, there were the RADA years. She seemed to have been worshipped by Albert Finney, adored by Richard Harris, and fondled by Peter O'Toole (or as I'm sure I heard it, tooled by Peter O'Fondle). In between her white-gloved carousing she flitted from voice production, to mime, to fencing ('my sabre cuts once reduced Roy Kinnear to tears, poor lamb'), to ballet, to make-up, and back to voice. Her long-dead tutors Ernest Milton, Hugh Millar, Edward Burrage, joined us in the carriage, still graceful, fruity and fey.

She talked of nights in the Gay Hussar or the White Elephant, followed by dancing to Dudley Moore in The Basement. Satire at the Establishment always seemed to go with bizarre passes by comedians: Lenny Bruce offered to share his syringe, Frankie Howerd performed some act of dark obscenity ('well darling, I *was* in drag ...').

Most of all, there were the clothes.

'Darling, I was divine in my white piquet Mary Quant, top-stitched in black, and over it a black piquet coat with a stand away collar ... and Ossie Clarke *gave* me a bias cream crêpe with a keyhole neck ... and I wore my ribbed yellow wool A-line Courrèges, with the sweetest little pair of silver-buckled Guccis.'

I sat back in my seat, drifting in and out of Penny's monologue. Every now and then I'd snap into focus to hear her say something like, '... and then I looked down and Princess Margaret's hand was on my knee ...' or '... I'd never seen anything like it before or since; I swear it was *purple* ...'.

Who knows how much of it was true? Penny had a way of believing in her own creations, and that gave them a reality, a truth beyond any humdrum business of fact. But there's something more to it with Penny. It's as if things only ever exist when they've been externalised: talked about, or paraded before you. Nothing happens on the inside with Penny. What she thinks, she says, or rather she only thinks them once she's said them. And, for all her extravagant displays of affection and loathing, I'm sure she'd have no feelings at all if there weren't people around to observe them. I suppose that this is just another way of saying that she's a drama queen. But drama queen is too ordinary and plebeian a concept for Penny. Perhaps drama empress comes closer. And how she loves a drama! I promise, more than once, I've seen her place the back of her hand across her forehead and literally *swoon*, generally speaking onto the first-floor ottoman, which might have been designed for such things.

I dozed and, without even noticing the tunnel bit, I found we were in France. You can always tell by the sudden profusion of small, erratically driven vans on the roads. And then the Gare du Nord. I was sent off to find a trolley, while Penny, swaying gently on the platform, defended our cases from the predatory French porters.

There are two quite distinct sides to our trips. The bad bit is the marathon trudge around the fabric stands that fill the three huge hangars, big enough for airships, of the *Première Vision* exhibition. That consumes days two and three. It's no fun, but it's worth it, because it buys me, us, the good bit.

The good bit is Paris itself. I don't care how much cooler Milan and New York are; I don't care if the food is better in London, or the weather nicer in Rome. For me Paris has always been my Emerald City, my Wonderland, my place of dreams. As a girl I used to think that if I could just get high enough in the park swings I'd be able to see the tip of the Eiffel Tower peeping over the monochrome, rain-dulled roofs of East Grinstead. I'd get Veronica to push. 'Higher! Higher!' I'd shout. But she was never up to the job, and I resented her for it.

And Penny *is* different, in Paris. Of course, she's still a tyrant, and a bully; she still imagines that the world exists to pay her homage, or at least to make her life easy, and she still reacts with outrage when her importance is not acknowledged. But in Paris Penny manages to exude a light that warms, rather than dazzles. Somehow the hand thrust into the face of the waiter at L'Assiette charms his habitually pursed lips into obeisance. Somehow her attempts at the language, an extraordinary mixture of underworld argot, finishing-school refinement, and simple error (I once translated her instructions to a taxi driver back to her, with just the merest touch of editorial licence as, 'Hey, fuck ears, we would be enchanted if you could direct for us your carriage to the front portal of our castle. You have the scrotum of a bat.'). is greeted with indulgent good humour by the snootiest of Parisians.

We always stayed at the Hotel de l'Université, on the Rue de l'Université in St Germain. This may surprise you, but we shared a room: it was another part of the strange intimacy of our Paris times. The payoff, the compensation to me of Penny's gentle snoring, and to her, for my whatever it is that irritates her, is that we had the grandest room: a Neo-Classical cube of perfection. The Université could not have existed anywhere else in the world. It combined, in Penny's words, 'the stately grace of Racine with the panache and verve of Molière.' The service was attentive, but restrained, and even the youngest of the doormen knew that Penny, and not I, was the one to flirt with.

Most of all, the Université was perfect for the shops. And when in Paris, boy did Penny shop. You see, she never bought other people's clothes in London: it seemed to her too much like sleeping with the enemy. But in Paris, despite the fact that she chose the same designers that she shunned at home, it was somehow, okay. And for once there was some logic to her logic.

And so, after leaving our cases in our room, we skipped, on that first afternoon, as on every first Parisian afternoon, from Prada, to Paule Ka, to Kashiyama (not that it's called Kashiyama any more, but Penny could never remember its silly new name, and would look helplessly at me if I used it), to Sabbia Rosa, and then back to Prada again. Leather was on the menu, and we both found something suitable; she in a rich chocolatey brown, me in camel.

Because I'm in fashion you probably think that buying clothes is something of a busman's holiday for me. Working for fifty hours a week neck deep in the kind of clothes that ninety-nine per cent of the population can only dream about must, you surmise, dull the appetite? Wrong, so wrong. I still feel the near-erotic pleasure, the juddering, ecstatic, transforming joy of clothes. I love the foreplay: the touching, smelling, breathing of beautiful fabrics, before the sweet consummation of trying on, and the sublime climax of the purchase. I shiver still for satin-backed crêpe: cool, like a diamond, to the tongue. How thrilling it was to find out that silk velvet smells exactly as it should, of earth and leaf-mould.

It is still now as intense as the first time, that wonderful afternoon when Dad, for the only occasion in his sad life getting things exactly right, brought me home a perfect princess dress of polyester pink taffeta, studded with rosebuds, with a satin sash and a net underskirt. It was my sixth birthday. At the party Veronica spilled jelly on the dress and I pulled her hair until she cried. She was lucky I didn't drown her in the jelly bowl.

The first evening we had dinner in a little bistro that Penny claimed to have been coming to since her honeymoon, when she and Hugh had spent a month living in a brothel. Or that was Penny's story, and a very amusing one it was, full of comic misunderstandings of a classic French farcical kind. Hugh told me it was actually a perfectly respectable hotel, that just happened to have a lot of velvet about the place. But Penny never let truth get in the way of a good story, or, for that matter, a bad one.

The bistro was like a thousand others in Paris, although it claimed distinction by virtue of an assumed connection with an ancient guild of carpenters, or wheelwrights, or hairdressers. (Penny could never get the story straight, and it had a habit of changing depending on which of the waiters you asked, should you have the curiosity to enquire.) In honour of this association there hung from the ceiling an intricately carved *something*, a kind of gothic parrot cage. Again depending on the whim of the waiter, this could be a model of the vaulting of Notre Dame, a Medieval clock, or 'une machine pour fabriquer les cigarettes'.

As usual Penny asked me what I'd like, and then ordered something else for me altogether. And as usual it was an unmentionable part of a pig, with a gizzard garnish. Before our food arrived, but well into the second glass of wine, Penny broke off from a rambling monologue on what we should look out for at *Première Vision* the next day, and gave me a long and searching look, her eyes seeming both to widen, and yet sharpen their focus. That look was one of her specialities, and perhaps her single greatest business asset. No man, and few women, could sustain eye contact with her in Basilisk mode for long. It was her complete self-confidence of course, the total absence of those goading, middle-of-the-night doubts that riddle most of us, that gave her gaze its power.

'Katie, darling, do tell me what's wrong.' That was a bit of a shock. It seemed that Penny had had another of those rare, invariably cynical flashes of insight.

'Nothing. Why?'

'Katie my dear, I *know* you. I know how you are. I know your ways.' None of those things, I must add, was true, or even nearly true. Penny knew Penny; Penny knew the fashion business; Penny may well have known how to dance the Highland Fling, but Penny did *not* know me. The trouble was that something *was* wrong. I simply couldn't stop thinking about Liam. His face was projected onto elaborate eighteenth-century façades; his voice whispered through elegant corridors, his smile glimmered at me from the silver highlights on the grey-brown waters of the river.

'I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.'

Penny blinked away my objection.

'Darling, I'm here to help. I know what it is. It's Ludo isn't it?'

Ludo? What did she mean? There was no way she could know about anything. Unless Liam had ... no, that was impossible. She was speculating, trying to lure me out. Play, I thought, the innocent which, after all, I was.

'Ludo's a sweetie. What could be the matter there?'

‘Katie, you’re being brave. But I know you must be in anguish on the inside.’

I wouldn’t have called it anguish. What the hell was she getting at?

‘You must be a bit tipsy,’ I said, without any malice.

‘Darling,’ she said, ignoring me, ‘you must understand that men are different from us. They have stronger ... passions. You cannot blame them as individuals; it’s the species that’s to blame. I saw it on the television: their genes make them do all kinds of horrid things. We must learn to tolerate, to turn and face away. Victorian hypocrisy has something to be said for it.’

I was now completely baffled.

‘What do you mean, stronger passions? What horrid things?’ I asked. But as I spoke I began to realise what the old witch was up to. She was suggesting that *Ludo* was having an affair, or at least indulging in what Hugh would call, ‘a touch of oats, wild, the sowing of’. And that rubbish about not blaming. If poor old Hugh ever did anything more than flirt, she’d be at him with the pinking shears quicker than you could say ‘emasculatation’. And why would she intimate that her beloved son was acting the young buck to his prospective spouse? There could be only one answer: she had not yet renounced her goal of driving us apart, of saving the family silver from the counter-jumper. I had no idea if this latest stratagem was devised in advance, or improvised on the spot. Either way, I had no intention of allowing it to succeed.

‘But Ludo hasn’t got any passions, except for the sea eagles, and socialism, and curriculum reform, and things. They *are* a bit boring, but I don’t *really* mind them.’

‘Of course there are those ... enthusiasms Ludo permits you to know about, and then there are those which are secret.’

‘Penny, enough. Ludo is the most transparent, least secretive, person I’ve ever met. I’m sure you as a mother like to think of him as a roguish blade, irresistible to women, but that’s just not the way he is. *I* love him, but that’s because of what he ...’

‘Has?’

‘No, Penny, because of what he *is* on the inside.’

I felt a bit stupid because of that ‘on the inside’ stuff, but I knew I had won the moral high ground: not, generally, a terrain I’m particularly familiar with, but a rather satisfying place to find oneself. In any case, Penny was silenced, although that might have had more to do with the arrival of her sole, and my snout, than my redoubtable defence of her son’s honour, and our love.

I wish I could make *Première Vision* itself sound more interesting or glamorous. Of course it’s very heaven if you’re a fabric junkie. Every important, and most unimportant, European manufacturer is there. How many? I don’t know; a thousand, maybe? Two thousand? And that’s an awful lot of luscious silk-velvet, fine wool crêpe, and oh-so-wearable viscose. And so it draws the world’s designers. They come here eager for inspiration, desperate to find that look, the same and yet different from the others, strange and yet familiar, unusual enough to be a must-have, practical enough to become a must-wear.

And they come also to eye each other furtively, to chart slyly the course woven by competitors, to kiss and to smile, and to joke insincerely; to cut, occasionally, an old foe, or a new friend; to drink champagne on the terrace bar; to sneer, to snoop, to gossip, and to weep.

As soon as you negotiate your way through the surely exaggeratedly Gallic security (Penny never seems to mind the intimate body searches, offering herself up like those fish you hear about who go to special parts of the sea to be nibbled clean by other, smaller fishes) you find yourself in the first of the three colossal, hangar-like halls. Colossal and yet, because of the oppressively low roof, with its sinister girders and gantries, strangely claustrophobic.

Gliding from stand to stand, her fine head high, her step majestic, Penny was in her element. *Penny Moss* may only be a little company, but, with Penny in the ring, it punched above its weight. Junior assistants would be imperiously thrust aside, and factory managers summoned from dark corners, from which they would emerge brushing away crumbs and smiling meekly.

My job was to see to it that Penny made no major mistakes, ensuring that her (now irregular) flashes of brilliance were not undermined by (the increasingly common) gaffes. Who, after all could forget the Year of Lemon and Purple? The tactic, as you can probably guess, was to make Penny think that everything was her idea anyway. Flicking through the samples, she'd find something that caught her eye, and she'd make a noise, indicating pleasure or revulsion. I would join in with subtle harmonies, or really quite delicate dissonance. Either way, the right decision would emerge. There may, at some deep level, have been a knowledge that I was contributing to, perhaps even determining, our choices. But at the level of consciousness, or at least insofar as that consciousness found itself transformed into words, the job was all Penny, and my role merely that of factotum, sandwich girl, and drudge.

I was on my best behaviour, and in my worst mood. Penny's clumsy attempt to prize Ludo from my arms had, if you'll pardon a moment of melodrama, frozen my heart. And in Paris, of all places, where we were supposed to be friends, sisters, almost, with our shared room, and our suppers together, and the world to be won. I know that revenge is a dish best served cold, but that shouldn't necessarily limit your range: I planned whole buffets.

But then I'd done that before, and my plans always ended up like Miss Havisham's wedding cake. I always *mean* to be vindictive, but when it comes down to it I tend to forget what I was supposed to be angry about, or I just lose interest, and so I settle for a good long bitching session with Veronica. And anyway, Penny was a special case. I'd worked too hard to get where I was to risk losing it. Penny being a cow was always part of the deal.

So, over the course of the day, I let slip my plans for punishment beatings, sabotage, slander, and fraud. But, by some weird alchemical process, as these silly thoughts fell away, they left behind a strange residue. That residue solidified into the form of an Irish driver of vans. It certainly wasn't that I decided to use Liam as revenge against Penny. Penny couldn't possibly be hurt by *that*. The opposite, in fact. It would be to offer her my head on a plate. It was more a moral thing. Being treated badly by Penny made it okay to do something harmlessly wicked myself.

Towards the end of the day, as Penny was having a grappa with Signor Solbiati, a sad figure in crumpled linen, happy to escape into nostalgia with an old acquaintance, I noticed a familiar, elegant frame sliding towards me followed by a less familiar, less elegant shadow.

'So, Milo,' I said, 'what did you make of Penny in the all-too-solid-flesh?' I was expecting viaducts of archness, but I was to be disappointed.

'She was something of a hit. Added much to the gaiety of what was becoming a rather tiresome party. After all your griping I had no idea she was going to be such a scream.'

'So,' I laughed, 'she was right then.'

'Right about what?'

'You do fancy her.'

His reply was more thoughtful than bitchy, 'Well perhaps if she were forty years younger and a boy. Let's go for an ice cream. This, by the way, is Claude, Claude Malheurbe.'

I looked blankly at the middle-aged man by his side. He was profoundly unattractive, with one of those faces that looks like it's been put on upside down. He was wearing a black silk shirt, unbuttoned to show his pale chest, tight black trousers, and a pair of disastrous black pixie boots. His hair was long, and smelled strongly of mousse.

'*Claude Malheurbe*,' repeated Milo, with emphasis.

'Bonjour Claude,' I said, none the wiser.

'*Deconstruction Malheurbe*,' hissed Milo.

Of course. What was it – five years ago? that fashion got hold of some wacky French ideas, and decided to make explicit the hitherto hidden fact that clothes are made, rather than whatever the alternative was supposed to be. It did this by showing seams and generally having things inside out or upside down. Malheurbe was behind it all with his book, *The Hermeneutics of Cloth*, the fashion

world's favourite unread book. The previously unknown *philosophe* was courted by couturiers, and was whisked from his provincial lycée to burn briefly as a media star. In those days he was much more beret and Gauloise, which was why I didn't twig immediately.

His second book, *Visceral Couture*, which advocated wearing clothes on the *inside* of the body, as a way of exposing the last fallacy of 'biologism', that the internal organs escape the endless play of signification had, mysteriously, proved less popular than the first, and he disappeared from the fashion firmament.

There, you see. *My* three years in fashion college were *not* wasted.

'What are you doing here, Milo?'

'All rather secret. Really can't tell you. It's not as if you're known for your discretion. I assume that's why they call you flabby lips.'

Malheurbe sneered, or leered, or sleered, showing one brown tooth.

'Fine. Really couldn't care less anyway,' I said. Milo knew I meant it, and panicked.

'Oh, alright then, no need for the Gestapo treatment, I'll tell you. You know how XXX [Milo mentioned here a terribly familiar chain, that I really cannot tell you the name of, however flabby my lips] are going down the pan? Well, I've been asked to help. I'm here to let it be known, subtly, that I'm working for them.'

'But I thought Swank did their PR?'

'Yes, they do.'

'So what are *you* doing?'

'Well, you see, I'm here to give the impression that *I'm* doing it.'

'But you're not doing it?'

'No.'

'I don't get it.'

'Look. It's quite simple. What kind of image have XXX got?'

'Worthy, dull, cheap.'

'Exactly. And what kind of image have Smack! PR got?'

'Pretty cool, I suppose. Exclusive. Young. A bit druggy, a bit clubby.'

'On the *head*, darling, thank you. So, you see, as soon as word gets around that XXX have signed up Smack!, the whole world, by which I mean the whole world that matters, *our* world, is going to think that they're revamping their image, dragging in new, younger people, all that jazz. And you know what that means for City confidence and share prices.'

'But you're not actually *doing* their PR!'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because the kind of PR I'd do would scare off the grannies once and for all. This way, those in the know think XXX are cool, and the rest just carry on buying their knickers. Inspired really.'

'Don't Swank mind? It doesn't make them look too good, does it?'

'It was Swank's idea.'

'What's in it for them?'

'They get a load of industry kudos for thinking up the scheme and hiring me. There's awards in that kind of work. It's exactly the kind of thing PR pros love. One day PR shall talk only unto PR.'

So here was Milo, paid by a PR firm to pretend to be doing the PR for a company whose PR was really being done by the firm who paid Milo to pretend to do their PR. Unfortunately for XXX, as I found out later, Milo told *everyone* who'd listen, that he was only pretending to do their PR. This, of course, was good PR for him, but bad PR for XXX. I think.

By this point we'd queued for ice cream, and *I'd* shelled out a hundred francs for three tiny Häagen-Dazs – Milo's meanness in small things was legendary, an understandable, if unattractive

relic of his days of penury. We went to eat them in a bleak little garden, enclosed on all sides by glass walls and staring Japanese midget-women.

I was a little unsettled by Penny's success with Milo, and so I threw him a couple of examples of Penny's comical linguistic misunderstandings and consequent confusion, mainly concerning the admittedly rather bemusing system of signs in the building. Milo liked to squirrel away the Penny stories I gave him which he could then, in other contexts, attach to whichever designer he felt the need to bitch about.

At the mention of 'linguistic', however, and even more so, 'signs', Claude hurriedly swallowed the last of his ice cream (omitting, however, to wipe away a chocolatey smear from his upper lip) and started to speak, his eyes fixed on a point somewhere in the air above my head, as if he were addressing a lecture theatre.

'Ah yes, I can here explain for you your mother [MOTHER!], and her fear of the sign.'

He drew out the word 'sigheeeeen' in a vaguely fetishistic way.

'It is not just here. The whole world is now a text, a written text: everywhere there are words.'

Although I tried to listen out of politeness, Malheurbe's voice soon took on the quality of birdsong: not unmelodious, but basically just noise. Occasionally it would float back into focus:

'We are unconsciously, passively enmeshed in writing, in decoding and decrypting.'

Only to fade out again. Quickly bored, I looked over his shoulder and saw Penny re-emerge from her grappa with Signor Solbiati. From her excessively regal gait it looked as if it may have been *some* grappi (or whatever the plural is) rather than *a* grappa. And with that ability that people have for seeing you when you least want to be seen, she spotted our little group, waved and advanced towards us.

'For pre-literate societies this natural impulse to comprehend the environment takes the form of a deeper engagement with the natural world. So, every physical feature has a meaning, every rock, every tree, every animal spoor, a significance, a narrative, a myth.'

Before Penny could get to the glass corridor she had to negotiate a huge art installation. There was a new one every season, and this time it was a monstrous construction called *L'esprit de Tissu*, consisting of a wigwam-shaped chrome frame draped with millions of tatty lengths of yarn.

'With civilisation man loses the ability to read nature.'

Rather than walk around the obstruction (which, to be fair, would have taken a good five minutes) Penny opted, in a very Penny way, to go through it.

'It was only with the arrival of the Romantics and the invention of the sublime, that nature could again be comprehended, albeit as something "incomprehensible".'

I suppose the side she was facing may well have looked, to her grappa-fuddled mind, not unlike an easily-navigated bead curtain, and the installation had a certain airiness that invited an internal exploration. With barely a pause Penny thrust her way into the interior.

'You see, when you call nature "sublime" you have substituted a single, although admittedly complex, signifier for the multiplicity of meanings that primitive man saw in nature.'

I could see Penny's outline through the gauzy curtains of yarn. She'd become disoriented inside the wigwam and was feeling her way along the various internal planes and angles.

'And then even the sublime goes away – who other than I now talks of the sublime? – and all we have is the simple good thing the new "nature", which is completely benign, that thing which people with no style, no elan, walk through on a Sunday afternoon, with his ugly wife with his ugly children and his ugly dog. I'm sorry, but I hate these peoples.'

As her efforts to fight her way out became increasingly frantic I noticed with alarm that the wigwam itself began to wobble. I was not the only one: nervous officials were moving towards the *L'esprit de Tissu*; among them were a couple of gendarmes visibly excited by the possibility of being able to shoot an art terrorist in the act of desecrating a national monument.

‘But as the natural world has become lost to language, so our social world, and the built environment, has become, as I said, all writing. And so what happens when a person finds himself in a country where he does not speak the language (this has never, of course, happened to me: I speak all the languages)?’

The gendarmes and PV flunkies reached the wigwam but seemed reluctant to break in, despite the now precarious state of the structure which was being vigorously shaken by the one-woman earthquake within: who, after all, could know how heavily armed the terrorist might be? A fair crowd had gathered: sober-suited sales executives and flamboyant fashion junkies united in their lust for blood, and the faint but not forlorn hope that *L’esprit de Tissu* might implode.

‘For example your mother? I’ll tell you. She is again in the position of the civilised person who cannot read nature and so feels again the giddy fear, the vertigo, terror, loss, panic. I think you will find this explains your mother.’

Now we go for sex please, yes?’

With the mention of sex I tore my attention away from the engrossing spectacle beyond. I looked around. Milo had disappeared, the serpent. He’d probably been looking for the chance to dump the philosopher on somebody all day.

‘Sex?’ I said a little more loudly than I intended, resulting in a couple of turned heads. I had been caught off guard, but Parisian propositions were hardly novel, and I had a coping strategy to hand. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I’m a little busy right now. Why don’t I meet you tonight?’

I named a café in Montmartre, a place to which I’d never been, nor had any intention of ever going. It’s my standard way of dealing with that sort of pass. It always works. And when you don’t turn up, they either think something poetic and tragic might have happened to you and hold you in a special place in their hearts all their lives, or they curse you for ten minutes and then forget all about it.

Penny burst forth from the wigwam. Her hair, which had been tightly and precisely coiled into a chignon had broken free, and hung raggedly across her face, with a stray clump pointing to ten o’clock. Somehow her neat knee-length skirt had revolved a hundred and eighty degrees, and the split pointed accusingly at her navel. The audience broke into spontaneous applause, and hissed the gendarmes as they laid rough hands upon her.

‘Write down, please,’ demanded Malheurbe. I scribbled something on the piece of paper he shoved at me, and he scuttled off, clearly thinking that what was said about English girls was all true. The spell was broken, and I ran towards Penny. By the time I reached the crowd I saw that I had been beaten to it. Milo, in perfect, mellifluous French, was gently soothing the gendarmes and flirting with the PV officials. Penny looked upon her saviour with eyes of Magdalenic devotion, and would, I’m sure, have washed his feet, dried them with her hair, and anointed them with fragrant oils, had the necessary equipment and sufficient privacy been available.

And that’s about it really, incident wise. No charges were made against Penny and she fortunately missed the satirical endpiece on the French early evening news. The next day was like the one before, except with more cloth, less philosophy, and a dramatic reduction in Penny-centred art installation-oriented mishaps. On Saturday morning we flicked off the safety catch and gave Paris another burst of semi-automatic shopping, and then it was Eurostar and home. And yes, I thought lots more about Liam. And yes, the idea of sleeping with him, just once, or maybe twice, if it was nice, had grown in my mind, nurtured by boredom, and Penny’s haphazard malice. But no, at that stage, constancy, faithfulness, devotion, and love had the better, just, of abandonment, concupiscence (my favourite word since ‘A’ levels, O dishy Mr Carapace, dreamy stand-in teacher of English, and inciter of teenage lust!) and revenge.

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