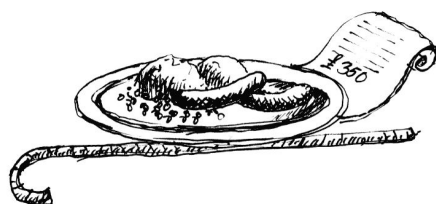


GOING OUT IN THE MIDDAY SUN

CHAPTER 1

London EC1 17 December 1996



Holly saw the yellow blur through the slanting rain.

Her heart sank: fourth time that month. What was the point of clamping anyway? The car was still there causing an obstruction. Towing was worse. The body chill at seeing the space where the car had been, followed by the sickening knowledge that there would be a trip to the car pound: the shouting mob of car owners, the thump of fists hitting shatterproof glass, handing over another hard-earned 150 quid, and then the trek back over the Acton flyover to be late for another meeting.

She wound in her self-pity, flipped the lid of the Motorola and listened to tinny Vivaldi before being connected to Mike from Capital Services. He said he would be there within an hour, and to make sure she had the cash.

Bastards.

What could you do though? The car was imperative for the job, the job was imperative for the rent and the flat was imperative to living in this huge throbbing city. In the glove box behind the grubby A to Z, Holly found half a Mars Bar. It was ancient: the chocolate white and crumbly on the outside, but it was in some degree comforting. She munched and waited. Her mind wandered to Greece — a farmhouse she had stayed in; the air warm, heavy with the scent of orange blossom, the echoing music of goats' bells from the herb-covered hillsides.

The bells became a strident horn as a battered white van narrowly missed a taxi and slalomed to a halt next to Holly's car. She left the blue skies, and reluctantly got out to meet the van driver.

Mike from Capital Services was very late, very gruff, and huge, not someone most people would want to mess with, which was presumably why he had the job. He hoisted the rusting yellow clamp into the back of the van, stuffed her wad of reluctantly-proffered cash into a pocket, shoved a WH Smith receipt into her hand and buggered off to the next kill.

Holly eased the car out from between a huge white Mercedes and an abandoned Talbot Samba, her mood momentarily lifted by such an absurd name for a small rusty car. A flash of memory jolted her from the thin grey street to tropical heat, searing colours and the mass vibration of a thousand drummers a million miles and years away. Brazil, Greece, South of France — there had to be a way out of this job. Life elsewhere.

Randy Fisher's photographic studio was in Kings Cross. The client and slimy Marvin, the art director, were due there at 9am. It was 9am.

Holly had 'the knowledge' as well as any cabbie, but all the snarl-ups were well in place plus a few extras, including a lorry unloading toilets into a new loft complex in Leonard Street. The driver, in a baggy shell suit, a fag drooping from his lips, wore an unhurried air as people leaned out of their car windows yelling and gesticulating; the air was thick with honking and swearing.

Holly got out her notebook and added a phrase to her 'anti-styling' song, humming another bit of the

tune. Calm: there was no point getting worked up. If she did, she would be in the back of the car under a blanket with a firework-display migraine by the end of the afternoon.

She arrived at the studio at 9.15 and climbed the iron staircase, nerves jangling. Randy's new assistant Marcus opened the door and mouthed: "Watch out, Marvin's already had three coffees." Randy was up a ladder fiddling with the large-format camera, the height revealing cowboy boots under too-tight white jeans. The Eagles were on the sound system and the client was leafing through a book of models.

Marvin kissed Holly lecherously and lightly groped her backside. Coffee breath and stale cigarette smoke enveloped her: Marvin, the huge beaky bird of prey, shaking from his diet of fags and intravenous black coffee with five sugars drip.

"Hi darling, you're late . . . we'll have to spank you."

"Yes, sorry, traffic." But he was already gone, sucking up to the client.

"Holly our Stylist — Roger Hillway from Streamline products."

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Did you find everything Holly?" said Marvin, looking even more beaky than usual.

"Yes: selection of smart office wear dresses, new Mac computer, phone, and er, the donkey head."

"Good, good," said Marvin, rubbing his hands. "Well, we've chosen the model."

There was a round of snorting laughter from the three men. "She'll be here at 10.30, should be done by 12.00. While we're waiting for the lab to process the film, we thought we might all go out for lunch."

Charlene arrived, blonde and busty. The outfit was chosen, the props arranged, lights put in place. No need for makeup as Charlene was to wear the donkey head.

"But you could have just used me," Holly was about to say, but realised Charlene and her breasts were the reason for lunch.

The courier came for the film, they all got in a taxi and were at the door of 'The School Canteen' by 1pm.

Holly groaned internally at the sight of the restaurant. She had gone there once before with a crowd of advertising executives and had hoped never to return. They were shown downstairs into the huge cavernous space and presented with menus by a gazelle-like young woman dressed in blazer, stockings, suspenders and painfully high stilettos. The client and Marvin were perusing the wine list, occasionally stopping to mentally undress Charlene, while Randy flashed his new mobile phone: "Yeah, sure I can fit that in this week, what's the budget? Not bad . . . on the way to getting the Porsche soon eh! See you on Thursday then — ciao."

Holly looked around the room at the tables of overfed businessmen on expense accounts and wondered how the world had got into such a state. She requested the day's special after a brief glance at the menu and excused herself to have a few quiet moments in the loo away from Marvin, who had started to rub a foot up and down her leg.

The loo was already well occupied with women checking their makeup; Holly made do with a perfunctory glance at herself in the reflective steel hand dryer: short blonde hair, disarrayed from the rushed start to the day, winter pale skin.

The large brown eyes stared back while her mind wandered: *What are you doing here? Why did you spend four years doing an art degree then to work in this superficial world? — must phone mum — wonder what Sam is doing now . . . do I miss him? No, but . . .* Her thoughts were interrupted by a blast of Robert Palmer singing 'Addicted To Love' as the door opened and two more women women swayed in to the crowded room, one of them bumping into Holly. "Oops sorry . . . d'you think he's going to ask me out then?"

"Why wait — grab him! I would . . . if I wasn't already attached, ha, ha — here try this, it's new by Givenchy, Organza."

"Oooh, that's just what I need, an Organza . . . ha ha ha."

Holly left and weaved her way back around the crowded tables. "Oh, there you are — we were beginning

to wonder what you were doing in there," grinned Marvin, nudging the client.

"Champagne all round," Randy announced to a waitress in a gymslip.

"Would you like a caning with it?" She produced a long thin cane and whipped it across her stocking encased thigh, *thwack!* Today's special is sausage and dumplings," she added, pouting, lips glossy red.

"Waahay!" shouted Marvin. "Yeah, bring it on!"

From a long way off, Holly saw herself sitting on the cliff edge near Durdle Door in Dorset — a warm breeze, nodding pink scabious, the cry of wheeling gulls. She had to get off this hamster wheel: wake, rush, buy crap for stupid ads, sit in traffic, home, sofa, crash, eat, sleep.

Randy was nudging her: "Top up? How's the sausage . . . phwoooah!"

At last the bill came: three hundred and fifty quid, to be hidden in the final invoice.

Taxi back, film back, no re-shoot. Holly packed the props, slipped out from the studio and found a car-shaped space where the car had been.

Tired and cross, with a flashing migraine, she arrived back in Muswell Hill after the long trek to the car pound. It had been a modern-day Hogarth etching brought to life, distraught figures clutching their belongings, the sea of waving fists, the wads of cash, the weakest pushed harshly to the back of the queue. The pound workforce, imprisoned behind sweaty safety glass, shouted back, threatened and occasionally sloped off to swig ale from huge earthenware flagons.

She stood for a moment in unpleasant reflection. Most of her earnings from the donkey head job would now be in the coffers of the Metropolitan Police. She opened the door of the flat and stood in a cat poop.

It would have been the easiest thing to open a bottle of wine and put on a comforting film but she suppressed the urge, knowing she would feel depressed the next day. She showered, dressed in her Vivienne Westwood trouser suit —reserved for times of needing a psychological lift — and caught the 134 bus into town.