

CHAPTER 1

When you are only twenty-two a twelve hour flight is time enough to meditate on the meaning of your entire life thus far. On that Boeing 747 did I endure while trapped in the sky, a torture of adrenalin coursing through my body, tantalised and terrified by what I had done. I was higher than high, there was no turning back. I was a victim of my own of ego. I sat staring through the round window, seeing nothing while slowly but surely British night went back in time to California day. I smoked endless cigarettes. The smiling air hostesses, like little goddesses in the clouds, disseminated glasses of wine to the holiday-making masses. The Americans say "vacation." This was no holiday nor vacation neither. Such a grotesque demonstration of the power my ego had over my soul.

In some vague attempt to strategise upon that Virgin Atlantic flight, I did solemnly and silently declare to my innermost self; *"Cardinal Rule Number 1: I must not drink Alcohol. Cardinal Rule Number 2: I must not spend money."*

If I could maintain allegiance to these two rules, I might perhaps shield myself from total deprivation or whatever else was about to befall me in one of the most infamously dangerous cities in the world.

I buried the little girl I once was very deep inside. She would - one day - be excavated. For now, it was up to the other me - sado-masochistic as she may be - to conquer Los Angeles without my vulnerable side. Impenetrable; that was the way I had to be.

And so to Los Angeles; where the streets are as wide as British dual carriageways and walking across a street is like a

mini expedition, but where the act of walking is only for schizoids and vagabonds. A city in which you are what you drive, meaning I was nothing for almost six years.

Welcome to the sprawling conglomeration of racial segregation; a city in which every race can be found but no race merges with another. The Mexicans stay way East, the blacks in South Central or MacArthur Park and as another stretch limousine carries another millionaire across the Beverly Hills border, never the twain shall meet. A city built on a symmetrical grid in order that direction requires no thinking. Welcome to Los Angeles; the largest open-air asylum on the face of our planet, an asylum inhabited by the most mercenary, egotistical and ravenously ambitious, cut-throat talent in the cosmos.

God knows, when I was twenty-two, Los Angeles was the perfect place for me.

My feet touched down upon Los Angeles ground to the gentle chorus of a million crickets. The first thing that got me was the heat, slightly claustrophobic to my British sensibility. LAX smelled of coffee, crocuses and cleanliness. The sheer size of Los Angeles International Airport dwarfed me from the get-go. I began searching for a sign saying 'Bus Stop' while trying to act like I knew what I was doing. Across a vast expanse of road I saw one. I lit a cigarette and inhaled while reading the signage.

Suddenly a loud American voice screamed, "don't smoke near my baby!"

That was the first thing anybody ever said to me in California.

His baby was strapped to him like a bomb, suspended in a backpack. Dad was wearing an L.A. Raiders baseball cap. I was not really standing close but I apologized immediately and stubbed out the cigarette.

A silver and blue bus stopped alongside me. On it were the words 'Santa Monica.' I had read a guide book which recommended a

cheap hostel in that destination and so I got on the bus and began hesitating and holding up the queue. Americans call it a 'line.' I didn't have a clue what to ask for. I tried to sound confident as I asked the driver for a ticket to Santa Monica. Behind his bullet-proof glass compartment he did not smile and I could not understand a word he was saying. He had to tell me three times to put a quarter in the slot. "America and England," wrote George Bernard Shaw, "two countries divided by the same language."

When I sat down, my face was pink with British embarrassment. I glanced surreptitiously at my surroundings and realized that mine was the only white face amidst a bus ram-jammed with black people. Opposite me sat an enormous woman surrounded by plastic bags. Her hair was matted and sun-bleached. Despite the heat she was wearing a multi-coloured cardigan which was fraying at the edges and the most magnanimous smile I have ever seen on public transport. I instinctively smiled back at her and felt immediately less like such a strange fruit.

"Where you going, sista?" she said in a voice loud enough for all the bus to hear.

"I don't really know," I said. "Maybe Santa Monica?"

"You all alone here, sista?" she asked.

I nodded. Two women in the next row shook their heads.

"Sista, you crazy?" she said.

"Yes," I smiled.

The multicoloured cardigan woman laughed so hard that the bus seat trembled. I could feel them all oozing dismay at me; an idiotic white English girl with no sense of direction.

My new friend shouted, "Honey, you so young all by yo self here in L.A., you be careful, you hear me?"

Boldly, I heard myself shout back to her, "sorry but do you know if this bus goes to Hollywood?"

The British have taken modesty to such extremes that asking questions is usually pre-empted by an apology. My sister looked aghast at me.

"You stay away from Hollywood, sista!" she declared. "Hollywood ain't no place for a chile like you!"

All the bus agreed - so it seemed - for there came various acquiescent murmurs from everyone watching the show. The consensus made me all the more determined to find Hollywood as soon as possible.

I was advised to stay in Santa Monica, where it was safer for a "chile" like me and - as the bus came to a stop - my sister pointed at the night:

"We in Santa Monica now," she said.

"Well, thank you," I said, and waved goodbye as the bus took my brothers and sisters away from me forever.

Santa Monica was full of British people; the very type I had abandoned only fifteen hours earlier. The Santa Monica Hostel was managed by a young, wholesome Ice Cube-lookalike called Leeroy. He had gentle eyes and a perfectly straight white smile. He asked me to go bowling with him after I had checked in. When I asked about Hollywood he shook his head and assured me I did not want to go there.

"Hollywood is too nasty for a girl like you," he said, "let's hang out at the beach instead."

I gave a polite refusal then went alone into the Santa Monica night with some vague notion of getting myself situated. It was around eight o'clock. I watched a strange kind of darkness seeping over the world. The stars were more like a Van Gogh impression than a real sky. I later learned that that was caused by Los Angeles smog.

Nothing looked real and everything was so big. I found a bench on which to devour a slice of watermelon - my ration for the night - and, as perfectly toned, tanned bodies rollerbladed their way through the Santa Monica sands, I reasoned that starvation would make me more attractive in the long run. Marilyn Monroe used to say, when she was hungry "nothing looks better than a washboard belly."

In my gut a concoction of fear and hunger ululated bearably. I

went back to what was to be my room for the night, locked the door, covered my sweaty, jet-lagged body in a thin white sheet - supplied by the Santa Monica Hostel - and stared at the ceiling.

I took that white sheet as a trophy, a sort of Virgin Hollywood swaddling cloth. I stole it in anticipation of sleeping on the streets; a sheet would save my skin from the dust and shield me from the sun. Perhaps Saint Monica herself was watching over me that first night. Eternal Angels are all around, aren't they? Isn't that why it's called Los Angeles?

Saint Monica or not, I knew I could not abide for long without a good view of the Hollywood sign. They had described Hollywood as hell on earth but I did not believe them. I got up from the bed and lay down on the floor like a good stoic. The floor builds character. As the sound of American police car sirens screamed through Santa Monica, I whispered into the darkness, "Happy Birthday, Marilyn," made a resolute decision to find the Hollywood sign tomorrow, then concentrated myself into unconsciousness.

On the morning of June 2nd 1994, in the lobby of the Santa Monica Hostel, I met a tour guide writing words upon a whiteboard: 'volleyball' and 'jetski' and other human games.

I said, "excuse me, I need to go to Hollywood. How do I get there, please?"

Imagine my horror when this man responded in a broad Scottish accent.

"Och, no ye de nay want te gae te Hoollywood. Hoollywood's bloody awful. We're gaen te play volleyball on the beach, why do ye nae come wee us?"

Leeroy came up behind me, adding, "Hollywood ain't no place for a girl like you."

Elaboration on the evils of Tinsel Town ensued, with an air of vitriol so especial to British mentality. I should stay in Santa Monica and "chill" with the ex-pats, he reckoned. There's a pub on

the promenade called The King's Head where the ex-pats "hang out," he told me. The way he said "hang out" made me cringe. He had come to California many years ago, but the Celtic accent remained even though his vocabulary was strictly beach banter. Through his crooked, sun-stained smile I saw a hideous image of my possible future; a future in which I would "hang out" for all eternity at The King's Head, dressed in little more than flip flops...

We shall drink together every night to the same monotonous refrain about the weather; effectively doing what we were doing back in Britain with one essential difference; the sun... We shall prop up the bar at The King's Head with over-tanned hands, downing pint after pint of suspiciously chilled beer, and in a grotesquely bleached-out accent, in sentences punctuated by the words 'man' and 'dude,' we shall volley forth an endless supply of vacuous rhetoric about how it is "raining and cold in Britain" and "ain't we the lucky ones, dude?"

A shuttle bus went from Venice Beach to Hollywood and I knew that Venice Beach was within walking distance of the hostel. The bus was due in less than an hour. I could easily make it on foot if I left immediately...

In a parking lot of organic, vegan restaurants I was approached by a tall, blonde homosexual carrying an array of plastic bags.

"You alright, honey?" he asked in a sweet drawl.

He was wearing huge orange sunglasses, a tall black top hat, purple bell-bottoms hemmed with tiny silver bells which jingled as he walked and fluorescent green flip-flops. Across his shoulder he carried an enormous tambourine. I smiled and explained myself.

"I'm just waiting for the shuttle bus to Hollywood."

"That left ten minutes ago," he said, "are you from England?"

The next bus was not due for another seven hours. My heart sank. The gay jester smiled.

"You don't wanna go to Hollywood, honey," he said. "Here's my card, gimme a call if you need help. I love your accent."

People in Los Angeles are so friendly, I thought.

Catatonic as a chameleon, for seven hours, I sat on Venice Beach staring at the waves. I had missed that bus for a reason. I needed seven hours of introspection; that was why the cosmos had conspired to make me miss the first bus to Hollywood.

On Venice Beach that day I was the freak. I had no pet python which I kept in a box. I was not juggling two chainsaws. I was not displaying my muscles in exchange for applause. I was not predicting the future from a crystal ball nor was I carving naked women from the sands. On Venice Beach I was the freak and every passerby seemed concerned for my well-being. After the fifth stranger asked was I okay, I began nodding instead of using words, having realized that an English accent was attracting too many questions for which I had no answers.

Slowly but surely - during the course of those seven hours - my stiff British lips were warming up thanks to the extroverts of Venice Beach. Such gregarious behaviour would be met with profound disdain in Britain. I felt my inner humanity breathing sighs of the sweetest relief. Perhaps California really was my spiritual home... It is a miracle that British people ever manage to forge friendships in a society so socially awkward. Alcohol is, of course, the Great British lubricant but Alcohol had all but killed me whereas extroversion seemed to suit me like an Oscar surely would...

Los Angeles smog obscures the power of UVB rays. I did not grasp the gravity of California sun on English skin until it was too late. Seven hours later, my shins were the colour of blood, so

burned I could barely walk. I hobbled back to the shuttle stop. Night was falling over Venice Beach. The chainsaw juggler was placing the python back inside his box, as tenderly and gently as if he were handling a kitten. My skin would soon peel away and I - a human snake - would shed the tight British skin no longer necessary because British skin would be tantamount to social suicide in this loquacious city where I had not one friend. And finally the shuttle bus pulled up outside the organic vegan restaurant.

I was feeling rather bold by then and thus I told the driver that he "must" alert me as soon as the Hollywood sign became visible. I went to sit alone at the back, purposefully not smiling at the other passengers because I was determined to share the ensuing moment with no one.

Any minute now I would see The Word on the hill.... The only word that mattered or meant anything to me... And through those gargantuan L.A. streets the shuttle bus moved along to the never-ending hum of cars and horns and police sirens, through all the dazzling night lights and traffic lights and the stopping and starting of green to amber to red and despite all the chaos I was relaxed and serene. A stunning silence had taken hold of me; the silence of anticipation the silence of any minute now... any minute now and then the bus driver was calling out to me:

"There it is, Tracy, ma'm, up there on the hill..."

"Thank you!" I replied aloud in my new confident voice.

I lowered my head and squinted through the windscreen. Up there, way up there, oh yes; I could see it: The Word. The Word on the hill, illuminated by monumental flashlights, nine fine white letters spelling The Word, the word which was as wondrous to me as the Sphinx might be:

H O L L Y W O O D

A joy like no other swelled in my heart as tears of pride welled up in my eyes. I knew then, for sure, that my grandfather had told me the truth when I was three years old; that I was the most wonderful, the most amazing, the most brave and brilliant little girl in the world and that I could do anything I wanted because the fairies in the magic world would always look after me because I was the most magic little girl in the whole wide world. Of all the grown-ups I knew when I was little, only my grandfather told me the truth.

Hollywood. Hollywood. I was in Hollywood.

If he was looking down on me at that moment, I reckon my grandfather - an ex-coal miner who spent many years in bed with tuberculosis and never left his village - would have been overcome with pride as I gazed up at the Hollywood sign. All little girls should have someone like that to take them through the first seven years.

"All little girls should be told they are beautiful even if they are not," said Marilyn Monroe.

And if you should happen to be a little girl to whom the grown-ups keep on lying, take these pages into your heart too. I am writing them now - among other reasons - for you.