

Chapter 2

Way up high in the Hollywood Hills is a hostel called The Banana Bungalow. That was where I stupidly paid for a shared room all because Cardinal Rule Number 2 was weighing so heavily upon me. Imagine my horror when I found myself holed up in a communal room filled with drunken German students. They were seriously middle class, from good parents with healthy bone structure and strong limbs. They had perfect skin and naturally blonde hair and they had all come to Hollywood simply to have fun. In my condition it was almost akin to spending the night in a concentration camp. They talked - in German - until at least four a.m. It was only my private contemplations of Friedrich Nietzsche and suicide that got me through the night. One of them was so taken aback by how burned my legs were that she gave me a tube of aloe vera gel. But it was no good. My second Cardinal Rule simply had to go. I could not share a bedroom with any other than the other me.

It was only just daylight when I staggered into the reception area like a zombie. The morning receptionist was just starting her shift. She was pretty, blonde, wearing very short shorts showing her perfect legs. Her smile was so lovely I almost stayed on. It was an idyllic setting, I cannot deny. Way up there in those Hollywood Hills, an enormous whirlpool in the open air, a log cabin sauna surrounded by Californian trees.

I needed to have my feet on the ground where the pavement was all pink stars. The Americans say 'sidewalk.' I had to leave The Banana Bungalow and fast. The receptionist wanted to know where I was going so early in the morning. I paid my bill and I told her a lie; I did not need a taxi. I wanted to walk, I had to walk, to clear my head. I had nothing to carry and I really, honestly, wanted to walk.

She kept on saying, "nobody walks that far in L.A. It's way too dangerous to walk to Hollywood Boulevard. It's gonna take at least an hour. Please let me call you a cab."

I smiled, declined, slung my bag over my shoulder and

graciously walked away, a monomaniac on a mission. Of course I could not admit that I could not afford the taxi fare. British people never admit they are poor, even when it's obvious. It's okay to not have money in Britain, but it's almost a sin to tell anyone.

After about half an hour of limping along, I began to feel like an insect of Kafkaesque confusion. A thousand California number plates raced on by, a thousand passengers traversed my vision. To quell the terror of what I was doing I began narrating acceptances speeches I would one day give to The Academy.

"You have no idea what I had to go through to win this Oscar..." I would say.

"I had to cross the 101 Hollywood Freeway, on foot, to get this Oscar!" I would say, and "as T.S. Eliot once wrote, 'in order to become what you are not you must go through the way in which you are not.'"

Back in Britain those lines had all but incited my own suicide but now they spurred me on as I headed down what seemed like an endless street called 'Cahuenga.' The Banana Bungalow had told me it would take me directly to Hollywood and Vine, but when? How long can one street go on? Those pink stars in the pavement had to appear soon. And I kept on walking.

I was walking for Cherie, for Marilyn in Bus Stop. She had been conned by a sexist director to trade her Hollywood dream for a cowboy and a farm. I was going in her stead, that was why I must go on, I was going where she should have gone... and other rationalisations galvanized one footstep after another.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning when I reached a 7-

11 on a street called Yucca. There was still no sign of my beloved Boulevard and I began to think myself lost. I was standing at a stop sign, afraid to cross over because I was not sure if it was the right way and it took so long and so much energy to cross a street in this city, when I noticed a figure standing nearby wearing a leather jacket and black jeans. He had dirty blonde, unbrushed hair.

I said, "sorry to bother you but could you tell me where I might find Hollywood Boulevard, please?"

He was not wearing sunglasses and his smile was sweet enough but his eyes looked at me with pure incredulity.

"Do you know where you are?" he asked.

I said no.

"This is the most notorious 7-11 in L.A.," he said. "It holds the record for the highest number of shootings in town. You really shouldn't be standing here alone."

A ripple of intrigue went through me.

"My name is Tracy, pleased to meet you," I said and put out my hand.

His name was Jason and I decided to trust him because my brother's name is Jason too. Jason was a guitarist from Brooklyn who had come to Hollywood to break into the record industry. By the time we had crossed over he had given me his telephone number, assured me that nobody walks in L.A. and, if I needed any help, I should call him. He gave me directions for Hollywood & Vine, turned a corner and was gone.

People in L.A are so friendly, I thought.

I went on struggling down Cahuenga thinking 'surely I cannot have missed the turning?' because the street was so painfully long and my legs were burning beyond tolerable by then when, through my cheap sunglasses I thought I caught a glimmer of pink. Up ahead, through the vast corridor of high-rise buildings and old-fashioned fire-escapes... down there, the pavement is pink. One more step

and I was certain and the pain in my shins began melting away and my steps were gaining speed because I was almost there, on my own two feet, so close to that street, that blessed Boulevard and simultaneously I could feel a strange foreboding in my gut but I kept on, it was just tiredness, just tiredness and relief, that's all it was... *just keep walking Tracy*, said the other me.

"What will the first star be?" asked she.

And I kept on walking but still that awful foreboding deep down...

'Keep walking Tracy, ignore it, it's just exhaustion and soon you will sleep...'

But though I persevered, though I walked on something unintelligible was being born, way down in the abyss, bubbling in my gut, growing in the viscera and I tried - oh how I tried - to suppress it, to push it down but it was so much stronger than me and I already knew. Up ahead was Hollywood Boulevard, up ahead; Hollywood and Vine and the foreboding was unavoidable now, and I knew. I already knew.

When I first set foot on Hollywood Boulevard the world turned grey. There was indeed a name on that first star, but I could not see through the squalor and the despair. Life - for me - instantaneously lost all meaning when I first saw Hollywood Boulevard. For twelve years I had waited and all for nothing.

I know I turned left, but I went on walking in a vague somnambulism so that when I saw the big overhead sign saying 'Vine' it signified nothing.

The sun was hammering down. My shins were burning like a crematorium. The flame of spirit in me was flickering its last. I could hear the shop front shutters being raised up as a voice inside me was saying 'turn around, go back. Turn around Tracy.'

A convertible Mustang full of guys called out, "wanna ride?" as I went on walking over the names of every movie star who had lured me under such cruel pretences to this awful place. I had not

landed over the rainbow at all. I was in William Blake's Hell and the Tigers of Wrath wanted vengeance but I had no energy left with which to fight.

Across another road I could see the Pantages Theatre, close enough to reach in seconds, but somehow I knew that that too would be a mausoleum from an era long-gone. The eyes of every shop owner opening his doors were crawling over me like cockroaches as they called out "ola mamacita" in my wake.

I had arrived a hundred years too late. It was 1994, not 1894. Talking Pictures had had their day and everything had been said and done before I was even born. My inheritance were these devastating remains, an era which the magazines were aptly calling 'Grunge.' Onomatopoeic to the core. The word 'grunge' sounds revolting. 'Grunge' can never compare to the word 'Golden,' Hollywood - can it?

Hollywood was done. My degenerate generation had finished it off. I had known for at least five years that Britain was a wasteland. I had no idea that Hollywood would have lost all of its life force too.

And now coming towards me was a cacophony of clattering cans and rattling bottles, a jingle-jangling shopping trolley pushed along by an enormous, ferocious black man. His hair was so long that it almost covered his face. Natural dreadlocks bleached a hundred differing hues after a thousand years of over-exposure to Hollywood Boulevard.

He was truly mind-bending, a sight to behold. A magnificent work of art, a story waiting to be told. It had taken Hollywood at least an hundred years to make him. He was as disarming as Michelangelo's David, as defiant as Diogenes and he came toward me, pontificating at top volume about Jesus Christ and the clatter of his shopping trolley served as a musical underscore to the wild diatribe: the end of the world was nigh, only a few would be saved and "Jesus Christ will come to this town for the day of reckoning and all sinners will finally know who they are and we should all be ready and beware because only a few will be saved and you, sister, you will be saved..."

I did not cross the street. I was not afraid of him. He was magnificent in his own right and I envied his free form truculent philosophising. As he got closer to make his final declaration he began pointing at me. His nails were so long that they curled around his fingertips like claws. And he began repeating that I, like him, would be saved.

He could have grabbed me or spat at me or anything at all, but somehow I knew he wouldn't do those things. He just kept on walking and talking and as we passed each other by the stench of dried urine, stale beer and decaying human spirit made me almost cry. I had turned back - or what I thought was back - because I was by then so disoriented that I didn't know up from down or left from right. In time I would learn North, South, East and West. The Los Angeles grid teaches that to all its children.

On my right I saw the famous Snow White Café and just beyond it a young black girl, emerging from a huge blanket. Behind a window I saw vintage Hollywood clapper-boards on sale for fifty dollars. When the little black girl caught sight of me she began shouting for coffee. Her hair was boy-short, her toenails painfully overgrown. As she glared up at me, I clocked the same crazed expression as that of the philosophical cart pusher, although she was at least two generations younger.

The shop fronts were now raised on all sides. They were selling PVC catsuits, latex mini dresses, six inch heeled thigh length boots and crotchless knickers. The Americans say panties. I crossed over, curious at the display of a lingerie shop called Frederick's of Hollywood. The underwear was delicate and pretty but overhead I was horrified to see an enormous billboard upon which lay a woman who surely should not be on a Hollywood billboard. She was dressed in a luminous pink body stocking, her breasts were a hundred times bigger than Dolly Parton's and on her face she wore more make-up than a Max Factor store. Her lips had been stung by a million angry bees. This was no Marilyn Monroe,

this no Jean Harlow. Suddenly I wanted to scream, "no! Women in Hollywood do not look like that!"

Her name was ANGELYNE. At the first sight of Angelyne I wanted to cry. Angelyne made me ashamed at being female then, I resented being a little girl who believed I could find myself - or love, even - in Hollywood, then.

Many years later I saw Angelyne in the flesh. She was flicking through the spring collection of body-stockings at Frederick's when I saw her. By then I had grown a Hollywood-shaped heart. She was teeny tiny and terribly fragile, so vulnerable to behold. Just a little girl who had tried to buy love with plastic surgery and all the anger I felt at first sight of her didn't occur to me when I saw her for real. All I really wanted to do by then was give her a big soft cuddle.

Many women in this world get a strange sense of superiority from caustic criticisms of women like Angelyne. It seems to me that those bitches lack the very vulnerability that girls who become women like Angelyne tragically could not cope with.

I said nothing to her, of course. I simply bought a pair of Frederick's black panties and moved along. Angelyne is as much a part of my time on The Boulevard as the little black coffee girl in a doorway near the Snow White Cafe. She screamed the same thing at me every morning for at least two years. When I finally did buy her a cup of coffee - circa 1998 - she turned her nose up at it and said, "I already had me a cuppa coffee, you got five dollars?" I never did find out her name.

Somewhere around the forecourt of Mann's Chinese Theatre it is likely that my brain went into survival - or blackout - mode because, try as I might, I cannot recall seeing any other people around which is impossible because it was June, at one of the most visited tourist attractions in America. To my memory it seems as though I really was all alone while I tried to fit my feet into Marilyn Monroe's prints. I got down on my knees to put my hands in

hers, but both my feet and hands were too small. Gloria Swanson's; too small. Greta Garbo too big. I stood over Lillian Gish thinking 'I am the wrong size in the wrong era, everything about me is not quite right.'

In *The Hollywood Bus Stop of 1995*, Gilson Simoes says that a dream is a terrible thing to break.

"You can break an arm or a leg and it will heal," he says, "but to break a dream when you are so young; you will never heal from that break."

A note found years later, written on June 3rd 1994, says:

Hollywood Boulevard. Worst disappointment of my life. Only the homeless and the hopeless are on Hollywood Boulevard. Great Expectations smashed to smithereens. Marilyn's star is outside McDonald's.

I am in a motel. I know - I must not spend money, but I need a place to cry. I am five thousand miles away from home. Nobody knows where I am. I'm gonna lay down on this bed to die.

Maybe I did die; right there at the La Brea Motel. Maybe I was killed by one of the gunshots I heard as I descended from that long day's journey into night. There were women screaming outside my room, loud American women screaming at loud American men and maybe one of those women was me. Whether I was dead or still alive when I opened my eyes seems of little importance now. It was daylight and I awoke . . . *different.*

On the desk beside the telephone was a Gideon's Bible and a Yellow Pages. I stared for a long time at those two books. The choice was not inevitable. I found a curious section entitled 'Casting Directors.' Not a section we have in Yellow Pages back in Britain but I knew exactly what it meant and I knew what I had to do.

I shut my eyes tight, I took a deep breath. Then I set a bold finger down at random. It said:

Gilson's Casting. 7060 Hollywood Boulevard. 213-466-2181.

Maybe I'd gone mad. Or maybe I was just plain hungry. Hunger can do strange things to the mind. I dialled that number there on the yellow page and the strange voice said, "where are you honey?"

"I'm at the La Brea Motel," I said.

"You can spit at me from there! Come on over, honey, I'm on the ninth floor."

That bold random action - that telephone call - was to set in roller-coaster motion a journey stretching across six years of my life on The Dark Side of Tinsel Town.

But this story is not about me.

I walked into the shower with a newfound conviction that I had made the right decision. Ignoring the cockroach in the sink, I washed my body with cheap motel soap, smeared a hint of makeup onto my face and put on my one and only costume worthy of the ensuing occasion. I picked up my portfolio and demo tape and opened the door. The early afternoon sunshine almost knocked me over. I was nervous, yes, but a new temerity had arisen from the ashes of yesterday. I was on my way to see a real casting director on Hollywood Boulevard. I had everything to live for.

As I crossed over La Brea towards the four silver sirens who stand sentinel at that world-famous intersection, I imagined myself being filmed in slow motion... the blue silk skirt of my

one and only dress swayed with the style and grace of a silver screen icon... There stood before me that building; 7060 Hollywood Boulevard.

I went into the lobby and asked the concierge the way to Gilson's Casting. I had arrived.

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