

Chapter 4

I was, of course, lying. I had never really acted except in the school nativity of 1979, it was a silent role as a naturally blonde, eight year old Virgin Mary. And - circa 1974 - I had regularly performed The Good Ship Lollipop while standing on the Post Office counter when I was two or three. According to the old women waiting in the queue to collect their pension money Shirley Temple had nothing on me. Intuition told me not to mention Mayfair Magazine.

I took one of Gilson's cheap cigarettes without asking.

He said, "hey, do you happen to have any English money, Honey?"

In my purse was one five pound note. The only English money I had left in the world. I handed it across the matt black desk and Gilson Simoes began to fawn over Queen Elizabeth the Second.

His accent was a strange amalgamation of twists and turns which took my guesses half way around the world. He finally told me he was part Swedish part Brazilian but his vernacular was pure Tinsel Town.

Every time I tried to persuade him to listen to my demotape he waved my suggestion away with an apathetic claw. He was flicking again, through my portfolio, telling me he could shoot far better photos which could get me into the movies. He was, so he claimed, also a photographer.

Back in London - in 1992 - that demotape had opened many doors. Our band was called Lovelife and I had written some lyrics for a song we called Sexlife. Those two talented musicians had tried to teach me dedication and discipline, no mean feat. I was a nineteen year old alcoholic addicted to solitude and literature, useless attributes if your plan is world domination via the medium of popular music. Sexlife by Lovelife; it almost got us signed. I hated life and sex back then and was only happy when drunk on James Joyce and Dom Perignon in some West End strip club surrounded by rich Arabs, cigar in one hand, waxing relentlessly in the style of Molly Bloom while some utterly stunning dancer

gyrated her shaved vagina so close to my face that I could almost smell her, in those days I called myself Sacha.

"Lemme tell you something about Hollywood, Hun," said Gil.

"You already told me that," I said, "and I know the Golden era of Hollywood is dead but this place created Marilyn Monroe and Billy Wilder and Greta Garbo. They are not snakes or vipers or rats or cheats or liars!"

"Honey, you're a real bitch!" he said, "you are gonna be a big star!"

And not long after that, in walked Chuck. Six feet six inches of pure black pulsating muscle, eyes hidden behind genuine, jet black, wrap-around Ray-Bans, sipping Jack Daniels from a solid silver flask, chain-smoking Dunhill cigarettes, with a voice deeper than hell and American politics on his mind. The sight of Chuck rendered me speechless. He was not of this planet born.

He lifted Gilson into his arms as if picking up a paper doll and hugged him tenderly as Gilson declared, "Chuck, you miserable nigger!"

"Gil, you spineless cracker!" said Chuck.

Gilson turned to me, "Honey, this is my best friend in the whole world," he said.

The big black giant set Gilson down on the grey carpet, took my hand and kissed it with as much gallantry and poise as if he were Lawrence Olivier.

He said, "what you doing with this guy, little lady? He's crazy!"

"Chuck, dis is my new star!" shouted Gil, "she's from the greatest country in the world... England! Show him your English money, honey."

I presented Chuck with my five pound note.

"Look at dis, Chuck, dis is craftsmanship," Gil said. "Dis money has got class. The pound is so superior to the dollar."

Chuck was not impressed; "Gil, what the fuck you talkin' 'bout?"

"England, Chuck! The greatest country in the world," said Gil. Chuck shook his head and turned to me. I could not see his eyes.

"No offence to your money, honey, but the dollar is more powerful than the pound, don't you think?"

I said, "Great Britain is a contradiction in terms nowadays."

"Hey Gil!" shouted Chuck, "you got an intelligent woman in your office for once!"

"Motherfuckin sonnovabitch!" yelled Gilson.

They argued then for hours about world super powers while Chuck sipped from his flask and lit one Dunhill after another. Gilson sucked back the Cobra and chain-smoked the GPCs. I declined Chuck's offer of shot after shot but smoked both their cigarettes non-stop. Nowhere else in the world are business meetings conducted quite like they are in Hollywood. I loved all the abominable lingo, the way they insulted each other as if Quentin Tarantino had written the script.

Somewhere along the line world politics grew pale and they turned to the much more important matter of 'The Industry.' The Industry: this is crucial. In Hollywood there is only *One Industry*; The Entertainment Industry. There is no need - in Hollywood - to specify this to anybody but a Tinsel Town Virgin. And on June 3rd 1994, I was the only Virgin on the ninth floor.

The Industry was fucked, Gil was saying. 'SAG' had ruined things for guys like him.

"S.A.G are a pack of snakes, vipers, rats, cheats and liars, Chuck! They're fuckin' me in the ass every goddamn day," he said for the fourth time.

"Gil you gotta learn to work with them," Chuck repeated.

I watched intently as Chuck opened his briefcase, took out a brand new bottle of Jack Daniels, refilled his flask and continued. I had given up expecting him to take off his sunglasses. I was sipping Californian spring water called Arrowhead which I had bought from a liquor store called Limelite

next to Motel Hell.

A long harangue ensued about this thing called 'SAG' and Chuck proselytized eloquently on the unforgivable error of 'missing the dollar because of the dime.'

"There you go again, Gil," he went on, "scratching around on the side walk, searching for the dime and you missing the dollar."

"Chuck if SAG weren't in the picture I could do dis!" said Gil.

When I could get a word in, I said, "what is 'SAG?'"

At this, Gilson's expression morphed into pure adoration. He stretched a hand across the desk in an effort to touch me, but I immediately recoiled.

"Isn't she gorgeous!" he declared, "can you see why I love her so much?"

"Don't you listen to him, little lady," Chuck was looking at me through those opaque shades with intense gravity. "He don't know what he's talkin' 'bout."

"But what is SAG?" I repeated.

Gilson actually stood up then, walked around the desk and tried to hug me. When I pushed him away he was delighted.

"My cold-hearted English queen!" he declared.

"S.A.G is the actor's union," said Chuck. "And my S.A.G card has got me two big budget movies this year."

And as Gilson returned to his position just in front of Jesus Christ Chuck explained it all:

S.A.G is the Screen Actor's Guild and if I wanted to be taken seriously as an actress I would have to get a S.A.G card. Chuck had a S.A.G card and Chuck had been in big budget movies because of his S.A.G card and he was making big bucks as an actor thanks to S.A.G and that meant that he could wear five hundred dollar suits and he could tip the waiter fifty or a hundred dollars.

During Chuck's monologue, Gilson was cleaning cigarette ash from the surface of the matt black desk with his hand. I soon learned that whenever Gil was bored he would repeat this routine which was how the desk remained perfectly black and empty.

"And you know why I tip like that, little lady?" asked Chuck.

I shook my head.

"Because in this town you gotta make an impression," Chuck went on. "In Hollywood you gotta get noticed and if I tip like that it means the next time I show up they gonna give me the best table 'cos they gonna remember me and when they remember me they gonna respec' me and when I get they respec' I gonna be a V.I.P."

It must be stated that Chuck - on appearance alone - would be remembered for eternity by anyone who met him, but from that moment on I wanted a S.A.G card. It would take four more years to get my hands on one but this story not about me. Satisfied by having convinced me that S.A.G was an essential element of the meaning of life, Chuck returned to the pressing issue of dimes versus dollars.

"Gil you drinking too much man," said Chuck, who had by then finished three full silver flasks of Jack Daniels.

"You can't work and drink all day, Gil. You forgot how to play the game..."

Gilson glared at his best friend in the whole world. Then he shouted, "man, I'm the one drinking and everyone else is getting drunk!"

Chuck lectured him for a full half hour on the sin of losing 'the eye of the tiger' which was the reason why Gil could not make a buck, according to Chuck.

The Cobra must have been in control of Gil by then because he began ranting about some 'Asian bitch' who had tried - only last week - to steal the casting company from under his nose.

"She's a Hollywood snake, she told me she would look after me and she tried to steal the business from me..." he kept on, but neither Chuck nor I knew what the hell he was talking about.

Chuck refilled his flask once more, letting Gil rave on until the task was done, then he lay into Gil with hardcore Hollywood philosophy. Chuck was sick of this negativity.

It is not permissible to have a negative attitude about anything for very long in Hollywood. In Britain nihilism is woven into the fabric of our sentences. Imagine how wonderful it was for me to be in the company of a mentality which will not accept 'you

can't' as an answer to anything.

In Los Angeles, if you want it, you can get it. That's the general consensus. What you believe is what you will create in Los Angeles. It was a mentality so far removed from my black leather clad nihilistic upbringing that it was like growing a new brain and the procedure did not hurt at all. No longer would I be forced to swim upstream against the collective unconscious of my contemporaries. Those Anglo-Saxon fatalistic fish had almost drowned me umpteen times but I had swum harder and harder against them all and now, here I was, in Hollywood, nodding in agreement with Chuck's every life-affirming word.

"You lost the eye of the tiger Gil!" Chuck was shouting.

"It ain't S.A.G's fault you can't make a buck," he went on.

"You're scratching around in the dirt for the dime but you missing the dollar, man. You keep crawling on your knees on that goddam side walk meanwhile the gold is up here, Gil. You gotta get someone in here to run the business for ya. You gotta get someone who got the killer instinct. This business is a goldmine waitin' to be discovered."

A strange silence had pervaded suite 916 and both Chuck and I felt it. I was looking through the window at the skyscrapers of Downtown but the silence blurred my sight and gradually I realised that Gilson was crying. I didn't have to look at him, I knew it and so did Chuck. Real tears. Real Silence. It was then I began to care.

His bloodless complexion, so drained of life after an eternity in Hollywood, gave his tears a terrifying fragility. Chuck's lecture was silenced by those tears. The black man took the little white man's hand in his. I sought meaning in the grey carpet and then looked at Chuck who was smiling at me from behind his shades while he held on to Gilson's hand, not moving, saying nothing. The three of us just sat there and breathed while Gilson Simoes shed his tears.

Every Tinsel Town door had been slammed in Gilson's face. He lived in his office out of necessity - the necessity of following

a dream which had all but killed him. In many ways he was already dead. The dream had long since become a nightmare, but this nightmare was the only thing he knew. I sensed all this without being told and it was then that I began to care. I hated feeling sorry for him. I hate the physical sensation which introjection brings, the pain of being sucked into someone else's dream but, like it or not, I was sharing his dream already.

"I know someone who can run this business for ya, Gil," said Chuck. "I see someone with the eye of the tiger, man, and she's sittin' right here."

"She got it," said Chuck. "She got the look, she got the eye of the tiger. Look at her, man."

They both looked at me. From behind triple-glazed glasses and opaque Ray-Bans, two sets of eyes began scrutinizing my eye of the tiger.

"She's the one," Chuck went on, "she got the eye o' the tiger. She can run this business."

I had been on Hollywood Boulevard less than forty eight hours and a casting company was being offered to me. I did not want to refuse outright because Gilson was so clearly in need but inside I knew I would accept no role in Hollywood except the lead. I said I would have to think about it.

As soon as it was tentatively agreed that I would take over the management of Gilson's Casting from next week, Gilson Simoes went straight back into character. A superlative compliment about my natural beauty came first then he tried to grab my hand again.

"It doesn't mean I want to marry you, Gil," I said without compassion.

"My English queen!" he declared, delighted, one sado-masochist to another.

I was a cold hearted, superior, English queen. That was the character he had assigned to me and I slipped into the role as if Lee Strasberg himself had trained me to play it.

I could feel an approaching crash, the usual crash after too long spent in close proximity to the human condition. I had to go back to my motel room for some well-earned solitude. Motel Hell or

not, at least it had a bed. I wanted to be alone. It was time for me to go. Chuck stood up.

"Yea, man, I gotta go too," he said.

"Honey I am gonna take you out tonight," Gil said to me. "I'm gonna show you Old Hollywood, real Hollywood. Be back here by eight o'clock."

"Where you gonna take her?" asked Chuck.

"The Musso and Frank's. The oldest restaurant in Hollywood."

"Man, are you outta your fuckin' mind?" said Chuck, "that place is full o' dead people. Take her to Spago."

"Fuck you Chuck, I'm gonna show her Old Hollywood."

I was unsure if I could maintain my smile much longer without alcohol. The innate refrain of Cardinal Rule Number 1 was bearing down hard. I tried to push Gilson's invitation to tomorrow.

"No Honey, you are my new star, I have got to see you tonight."

Thus it was agreed that I would meet him beside the silver sirens where La Brea crosses The Boulevard at eight o'clock. Then Chuck and I left the office together.

The elevator had only just begun to descend when Chuck's enormous hand reached out and pressed the red emergency stop button. We thudded to a halt. Suspended there, between the 9th and 8th floor, overcome by a sudden desire to expose himself, Chuck removed his Ray-Bans. His eyes were abject insanity; jet black engorged pupils, the sclera shot with blood-red thread-veins, there was no doubt about it, I was in an elevator with the villain from Terminator. He reached forward and picked me up with one arm, bringing my face level with his. The aroma of Jack Daniels flooded my senses. He could have said something like "fee, fi, fo fum, I smell the blood of an English woman..." and it would have been perfectly appropriate.

I wished I was drunk enough to feel no fear because any minute

now he was going to crush me or do something worse. I could have been Fay Rae in the arms of King Kong. My heart beat on the edge of cardiac arrest as Chuck said, "little lady, I might be getting me a wife back home in Texas, but you say the word and I'll marry you instead."

That was the moment being sober came in handy because I could see a way out. I gave him the most angelic smile my terrorized state could muster and then my finest English accent.

I said, "well, now, Chuck, this is terribly sudden... I am very flattered but I'm British and we are far less forward in England. I need time to think this over. I have only just met you. Might we slow things down a touch? Give me time to think about this?"

My feet were swaying helpless in mid air. The scent of Jack Daniels had me by the throat. He was a Hollywood god, he could have done anything he wanted. But I could see that he was contemplating what I had just said because his eyes had rolled to the back of his head while his left brain began absorbing my modest proposal....

Finally he said, "you're probably right ... okay."

Then he set me down, touched the red button and the elevator resumed our descent. I smiled as he put his shades back on. He was less menacing behind those Ray-Bans. I had learned a valuable lesson. In Los Angeles, never underestimate the power of Received Pronunciation.

Outside on Hollywood Boulevard the afternoon sunshine was blinding. I stood on the steps of 7060, looking up at Chuck as if he were Zeus himself. He picked me up and hugged me then set me down again and for a moment a rare silence came, one of those freeze-frame intervals which we frantic human beings hardly ever notice.

I was gazing eastward, in the direction of Vine. Chuck looked right inside my heart and mind in that moment; he caught a glimpse

of every question in my subconscious, he knew every fear and hope I was carrying as I looked down The Boulevard towards Vine. I know this because of what he said and how he said it, with no prompting from me.

He said, "I gotta tell you, Tracy, you are gonna **LOVE** L.A."

Across his wise shoulders, through the razor sharp shadows of palm leaves, the sun flung a kaleidoscope of colours direct from Hollywood heaven. I beamed up at him, happier than I had ever been because of his prediction. I belonged now to Hollywood Forever... And, writing this almost thirty years later, it is truly stunning to contemplate just how wrong he was.
