

Another Holiday for the Prince

We're having this dumb play at school Falstaff or something I was supposed to be the Sheriff of London but the bell went before my part came on and as it was the long weekend Hot Legs let us go before the bell stopped. I went down and hung around the Deli for a while with the others and when I got home Mother was already there.

'Don't bang the door,' she said. 'He's still in bed.'

'Sorry!'

'He's sleeping,' she went on, she seemed relieved. 'Sleep's the best thing he can have. I wish *he'd* eat!' She watched me as I took bread and spread the butter thick, she was never mean about butter, when we didn't have other things we always had plenty of butter. I ate my pieces quickly before she could tell me not to spoil my tea.

Mother always called him the Prince, she worried about

him all the time. I couldn't think why. He was only my brother and a dropout at that. Dropped out from school and then dropping in and out of one job after another, sometimes not even staying long enough in one place to get his pay. I could always tell by Mother's face when I came in.

'He's back, was back when I came home,' and she would sit in a heap at the kitchen table. And after a bit I'd say, 'What's for tea?' and that brightened her.

'What do you think the Prince would like?' and she'd go up the terrace for liverwurst or something tasty to fry up. My brother smoked and drank and coughed and watched telly with the blinds drawn day in and day out and half the night too.

'He's resting,' Mother comforted herself. 'Boys outgrow their strength. They need extra rest. If only he'd eat and go outdoors in the air though!'

Saturday mornings I often went with her to her work to get her finished up as quick as possible.

Mother said it was a revelation every time she got off the bus and walked round the corner and saw the wide river below shining so peaceful with the far bank dark with trees and all the lovely homes piled up on this side of the hill. It was like a great big continental post card. The stillness and the blue misty light on the smooth water made her feel rested she said and she felt she was a better person every time she saw it.

We had the house to ourselves, it was all vinyl and bathrooms. She wouldn't ever let me do out the study.

‘There’s big cigars in there and sex drinks and books with titles,’ she said and she sent me to hang out the washing. There was nothing in the *Seducer’s Cook Book* to upset her she said and dusting those nude drawings didn’t affect her, she was too worn out and faded for that kind of thing.

We seemed to get on really quick with the work and when we sat down to have our cocoa she looked out at the river approving of the calm.

‘They’ll stay out in their boat the weekend,’ she said sipping gratefully.

‘I don’t like you going out to work,’ I said.

‘You don’t want to mind about that,’ she said. ‘Everyone’s got to work at some time or other, it’s best to like it,’ she said. ‘Otherwise you’ll have to spend most of your life not liking what you’ve got to do,’ she said. ‘My Mrs Lady is a lovely woman, such a good mother too, you saw all that nice washing! really sets an example, so clean you could do an operation in any room in this house. And don’t you ever forget those nice dresses and jumpers you’ve had from her.’

‘But you’re going for your life all the time.’

‘Hard work never hurt anyone. It’s good for me, helps to fight off the menopause.’

‘What’s that?’ Mother used big words. She read too much.

‘It’s when your life changes, you’ll find out later,’ she said, and then she said, ‘and where else could I have an avocado pear with my cocoa.’

‘Ugh! Avocado pear!’

‘It’s an acquired taste,’ and she waltzed off with the broom. Later while I was wiping out the saucepan cupboard I could hear her queer singing above the noise of the floor polisher. She seemed to get quicker and younger as she worked.

As we were about to go home Mother took a little key off a hook in the kitchen.

‘I’ve a very nice surprise for you,’ she said twirling it on her bony finger.

‘That why you were singing then?’

‘Oh was I singing?’ Her cheeks were suddenly bright red and her eyes seemed to be full of tears as if an idea was trying to burst out of them.

‘What do you think! Mrs Lady has left me the use of her car and some money so we can go away for the weekend!’ Oh I felt an excitement, I hugged Mother.

‘It’s a wonder you didn’t die keeping the secret all morning.’ I hugged her again.

‘My! Mind my living daylights,’ she gasped for breath.

‘The Prince,’ Mother said. ‘We’ll get him to that nice motel again right on the sea front. He won’t be able to avoid breathing the sea air if he’s right in it.’

Of course my brother growled. He was in a terrible mood. Mother pleaded with him through the clouds of smoke.

‘Only pack up a few things and just come. I have the car. Come and see.’

Grudgingly he looked. It took all the afternoon to persuade him.

‘Look at the roo bar, and see, there’s a radio,’ Mother urged him, she fretted at the waste of time. She promised to let him drive once we got down into the country to try to make him come.

‘But what about a licence?’ I asked.

‘Hold your shit Bogfar!’ he gave me a shove.

‘Now just you watch your language!’ Mother was severe. ‘Mrs Lady has fixed everything. Only be quick and let’s go!’ She had had a shower and her wet hair was flat on her head. She urged and pleaded and threatened and we set off very late, about half past five.

Next day he stayed in the motel room watching TV and Mother fretted on the beach.

‘Come in!’ I called her from the water. ‘It’s beaut in!’ And it really was considering the time of the year. But she couldn’t get up any enthusiasm, she couldn’t bear to see all that lovely sunshine wasted because he wouldn’t come out.

Lunch time my brother was still disagreeable. It spoiled the meal and he refused to eat his sweets. But Mother said afterwards not to take any notice when he growled, it was only because he had used his pudding spoon for his soup and she knew it wasn’t any use telling him with that snooty waitress looking on.

The motel was really gas! There was so much hot water

Mother washed out all our clothes and we both washed our hair again. I got out my social studies. Hot Legs has this idea about a test every Wednesday.

‘Shit head!’ my brother started picking on me. ‘Why don’t you get out before they chuck you out. That’s all crap,’ he said, knocking the book across the floor. ‘You’ll only fail your exam and they don’t want failures, spoils their bloody numbers. They’ll ask you to leave, see if they don’t.’

I sat there and howled out loud, though I didn’t want to, not in front of him.

Mother was furious, her face went bright red.

‘Why you son of a bitch!’ she screamed, I really thought she was going to go for him, she looked that mad.

And he put on a real idiot’s face and turned his eyes up so only the whites showed and he said in a furry thick voice like as if he was drunk, ‘Well if I’m the son of a bitch dear lady you must be the bitch,’ and what with his daft face and Mother standing there all towelled up there really was a funny side to it and we all laughed our heads off. I wasn’t sure if Mother was laughing or crying, anyway she got dressed and went off down into the town, we heard her crash the gears at the corner, it’s been a while since she drove anything. She came back quite soon with steakburgers and chips and ice cream and coke and we had a really good evening watching the TV.

On the Monday just when we should have been setting off for home, my brother said, ‘What’s the beach like?’

And Mother couldn't get him there quick enough. Oh he was a scream. He kept sitting backwards into the water just as a wave came and he went under as if he was drowning with only his thin white fingers reaching up out of the water as it swirled back. I thought Mother would kill herself laughing. She was really enjoying herself.

'Halp!' My brother sat back disappearing again into the sea and his wet white fingers grasped the froth of the wave. Mother played in the water like a girl. 'Give you a race!' she swam splashing and choking. She could only do about five strokes of anything.

I don't think I've ever seen her so happy.

We were nearly the last to leave the beach. We saw the sun go, leaving only a long red sky far out over the water which was boiling up dark along the sand.

'Come on!' My brother was nervous and irritable.

'Our Prince is cold and hungry,' Mother hurried me in the change rooms. 'We'll get a chicken and eat it on the way home.'

She seemed anxious suddenly. Her agitation was worse at the Chicken Bar, we had to wait as there'd been a little rush on chickens. She paced up and down the narrow shop and she kept looking anxiously out at the car. My brother was sitting there, we could see his white face through the dark, he was listening to the radio. We were all hungry.

'Smells all right!' he even smiled as we got back into the

car. Mother tore up the chicken dividing it on bits of paper between the three of us.

‘I’ll have to step on it,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to inconvenience Mrs Lady over her car.’

We were just about to start on the food when it seemed we were surrounded by the police. There they were poking their heads in at the windows, I felt a real fool.

‘Eat!’ Mother commanded, but of course we couldn’t and neither could she.

‘It was me! I took the bloody car!’ I didn’t recognise my brother’s voice, I couldn’t believe the words were really coming from his white face. He lit a cigarette blowing smoke all over his ragged bits of chicken. I could see his hands shaking.

‘You filthy bloody liar. You shut up!’ Mother screamed. ‘Don’t listen to that son of a bitch he’s ...’

‘If you’re not careful Missis,’ the cop said, ‘I’ll have to book you for obscene language too,’ and then he seemed to remember something. He looked hard at Mother. ‘You don’t vary much in your sort of crimes do you Missis. Wasn’t it just about here in similar circumstances a few weeks back, if my memory isn’t playing tricks.’

‘This is the only sort of crime, as you put it, as I need to do,’ Mother replied with quiet haughtiness. ‘It so happens it was a different car and it was a whole year ago. Time must pass very quick for some people!’ she added.

Mother cried when she knew she had to go to gaol, she never could stand unbleached calico next to her skin she said. And she felt so bad about Mrs Lady too. She'd hoped to get the car back before they got in off their boat and of course she'd intended to work off the cheque she'd written for herself. She would have liked to have the chance to explain to Mrs Lady.

After a bit she stopped crying.

'It'll be better for the Prince,' she said. 'A more regular life, and they'll see he eats.' This seemed to comfort her.

'Be a good girl at the Home,' she said to me. 'You won't be so strange as there's sure to be a few you'll know. And everything will all come right,' she said. 'A change is as good as a rest they say.'

It was awful hearing my brother cry later. I didn't know it was him at first, he sounded like a man crying. In his room he'd got this big box of chocolates all wrapped up ready for Mother's Day, it wouldn't go in his case with all his things and he didn't know what to do.

'I'll help you,' I said to him.

'Oh go to hell and get stuffed!' he said and banged his door on me.

In Pottery Class I'm making a jar with a lid. If it comes out all right I think I'll use it for a jewel box as we don't ever eat marmalade.