

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE SIXTIES

By

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For Caroline, Emily and Barnaby

“The thing the sixties did was to show us the possibilities and the responsibility that we all had. It wasn’t the answer. It just gave us a glimpse of the possibility.”

John Lennon

Once upon a time in the sixties...

According to my “ticka-tick” Timex watch it’s a little after 9am. I’m in a building at St James’s Square, London. The address is posh, and the names on the office doors include three double-barrels and, believe it or not, a triple-barrel. This is my first proper job and I’m nervously hoping I don’t bump into any of those names. They are ad men and as smooth as Roger Moore in *The Saint*. At least that’s what I’ve been told.

So far I haven’t seen a soul. Yet there’s life somewhere as I can hear the click-click-click of a typewriter or two. I can also hear someone running, clattering along the linoleum floor in what must be leather-soled shoes with steel-caps, the kind ex-army people wear in homage to their old parade ground. I hear a grunt, a curse. Clearly the person is being chased and should be stopped. I stand around the bend, where I can’t be seen, my arms spread open. Wham! I’m flat on my face staring at a pair of highly polished black lace-up shoes, just the kind that would have steel-caps.

I see long burgundy socks leading up to a pair of gentlemen’s suspenders, and knees like rock cakes hovering below boxer shorts with vintage cars on them.

The man bawls at me, “Have you seen my secretary?”

I lift myself up without a helping hand.

Apart from the missing trousers he’s immaculately turned out in a blue and white striped shirt with a stiff white detachable collar, red and white polka dot tie, and immaculately groomed jet-black Brylcreemed hair.

“The wretched gal has gorn ‘orff with m’ trousers again. All I asked her to do was press them!” He shouts in disbelief.

I gulp and apologize for not having seen her, not that I’d know her if I fell across her.

“Well you’re no bloody good!”

He pushes me to one side and races off down the corridor, shirttails flapping like a character in a Brian Rix farce, where trousers are regularly dropped to get a laugh. But I'm not laughing. I feel like running for it, straight to the lifts, down to the main entrance, passed the commissionaire and out the front door.

ONE

LONDON

Mid October 1963

“CAN I HELP YOU... *SIR?*”

I’ve never been called “sir” before. Not sure I want to be, particularly when I’m being shouted at by a commissionaire in a pseudo-army uniform.

“I have a 2.30 interview with Major Millard.” I explain and am ordered to take the lift to the fifth floor reception.

It’s eerily quiet when I get out of the elevator. I take a deep breath, feeling suddenly aware of my new C&A suit. The one my father insisted I’d grow into though it makes me feel like a cross between a refugee and a clown, especially outdoors when the wind blows and the jacket billows. I was a perfectly happy sixteen-year-old school leaver, leading a beatnik-inspired existence listening to R&B performed by my favourite new group, Mick and the Blue Boys, at the Ealing Jazz Club.

My parents, however, had other ideas. A golfing pal of my father said that his advertising company were recruiting trainees.

I tentatively push the glass doors and enter a large reception area. Three sides have floor-to-ceiling shelves that display well-known household products – Weetabix, Mars, Colgate, Mobil Oil, Wilkinson Sword. Two women sit behind a long wooden desk. One is middle-aged with heavy white make-up and mascara. A prominently hooked nose gives her

a haughty air, making me think of the eccentric poet Dame Edith Sitwell. The other woman is much younger and looks as if she's stepped out of the *Debutante of the month* page in *Tatler* – a perfect serene brunette in twin-set and pearls.

“Do take a seat,” the brunette says. She has a particularly husky, velvety voice, like the breathy actress Fenella Fielding. “Major Millard’s secretary will fetch you in just a few minutes.”

She gives me a smile showing just a hint of immaculate white teeth. The haughty woman ignores me.

My eyes settle on some miniature bottles of Babycham, one of my mother’s favourite tipples. The husky purr strikes up again.

“The managing director of the agency invented that product. The client was so delighted with the sales they presented him with a personalized Rolls Royce. Wasn’t that kind?”

Before I can reply a stout girl with a ruddy complexion and frumpy clothes hurries in. She races me along a deserted corridor as if we are late for an important date. I ask why it’s so quiet.

The secretary clears her throat as if to make an important announcement. “This is the fifth floor, the director’s floor. It’s generally quiet here, particularly at this time of day.” She gives a knowing smile and whispers, “Luncheon!”

At the far end of the corridor we pause before a white wooden door. The secretary adopts her conspiratorial tone again. “You’ll love the major. He’s a real sweetie.”

She cautiously opens the door.

Without bothering to look up Major Millard gestures for me to sit. My heart thumps like a sledgehammer. The personnel director couldn’t be anything other than a retired army man: a plump well-fed face, slicked-back silver hair, a nose just a touch too purple and, beneath it, a small twitchy moustache. He studies the papers before him. After a few minutes he fixes me with a steely gaze and bellows.

“So you’ve come to apologize have you?” He slams his hand on the desk. “What do you have to say for yourself, eh?”

I manage to croak out my name adding, “trainee job.”

He looks angrily confused. “So where the blazes is Mulligan then?”

The secretary appears and hands her boss what must be my job application. He flicks through the form and grunts. “Are you sure you want to work in advertising?”

I nod but would love to give the honest answer.

“And what part of the business interests you most?”

My basic homework has come up with an astonishing conclusion: that advertising is all about pictures and words, very often not many words at all. Given the choice I’d really like to go for the pictures side particularly as I fancy so many of the girls shown in the ads. The problem is that I’m not very good at art.

I mumble about wanting to write advertisements.

Suddenly the major turns even more purple. He slams his fist on his desk for a second time. “Are you mad, boy?”

He waves my job application at me. “Dreadful types the creative lot! Just look at that Mulligan fellow. Molests a girl in the lift and he hasn’t even got the courage to come and face up to me. Irish I believe, like that Oscar Wilde deviant. You’re not Irish are you?”

Without having time to answer the question, not that I think it needs one, the jolly-hockey-stick secretary rescues me.

“So that seems to have gone well,” she says. “I told you he was an old sweetie.”

She also tells me that I’ll receive a letter from the major within the next few days.

I don’t talk much to my parents about the interview. To be honest, I wouldn’t really know where to begin. Instead, I lock myself in my room listening to Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* while

drafting a letter to Mick asking if there is any chance of joining the group as a roadie.

Dear Mick, you may not remember me but I'm the bloke who bought you a few beers at Ealing Jazz Club when you were skint. Now that you and the lads are a bit more famous and that, and I do think Come On is a cool single and should stuff the Beatles, I was wondering...

Unfortunately a short letter arrives from the major a couple of days later offering me a position as a trainee on a starting salary of £6 per week with luncheon vouchers. I'm told to report at 8.30am the following Monday. My parents are delighted. The Rolling Stones will have to live without me.