

## **Chapter 5 - THE PARTY**

### **London, 2002. Suki Piper reminisces about her childhood.**

As far as I can remember, my parents only ever had one party – one really wild, debauched party that lasted all weekend – and I have subsequently measured the success of all other parties by it. This was before Dad left, before the TV went missing, during a brief period of domestic harmony that might have lasted only a week, it's hard to tell. I'm not sure what the occasion was for the party, but it was probably as simple as a flat warming. We had just moved to a larger apartment in a more prosperous neighbourhood and it makes sense that my parents wanted to share their good fortune with friends. It was a fancy dress party, but if there was a unifying theme to the wide variety of costumes, then I couldn't pick it. Mum dressed up as Mae West under a cloud of blond curls, her waist cinched in and her breasts pushed skywards, red patent stilettos on her feet, matched with a slash of crimson lipstick. I thought she had never looked so beautiful, but it's also obvious to me now that she must have looked rather slutty. This was unusual for my mum, who, as far as I can remember, only ever owned one pair of high heels. I wish she had owned more, because I got tired of trying on the red patent ones and longed for more of a selection. And when I grew up into a teenager it was my aunt, and not my mother, who taught me how to walk in high heels without teetering from side to side or toppling over, by thrusting one hip forward and then the other. It was so simple once you knew how.

I wore a clown suit to the party, black with colourful polka dots, something my mother made effortlessly on her sewing machine. We made pom-poms together out of yellow wool, cutting out cardboard donuts and winding the wool around them until we had fat, woolly circles. We made a pointy hat out of another circle of cardboard, folded over and covered with

the same polka dot fabric. I stuck a pom-pom on the top and tied the whole thing around my chin so it wouldn't fall off. My best friend Esther came to the party, also wearing a clown suit, but hers was store bought, so I felt mine was infinitely superior. We were allowed to stay up until ten o'clock but by the time it was that late, nobody told us to go to bed, so we just sneaked around, taking sips out of unattended plastic tumblers, seeing if we could find anything sweet enough for our palates. In photos from that night, we both have the wide-eyed look of possums, high on sugary punch and too wound up to go to sleep.

The most exciting guests at the party were Jean Luc and Henri, who came all the way from Paris on the ferry and the train. They were younger than my parents, perhaps in their early 20s, and even though I was too young to have a proper sense of these things, I could tell they were dangerous and sexy. They wore their dark hair long and rakish, smoked copious amounts of Gaulois cigarettes, and told dirty jokes to each other in French – I knew they were dirty because my mother, who understood the language, kept telling them off about saying rude things in front of me. Jean Luc, in particular, made me feel coy and bashful whenever he paid me any attention – I wanted him to talk to me but at the same time I couldn't handle it, would look at the ground, twisting my feet into awkward shapes and wanting, suddenly, to pee. I think maybe my mother felt the same thing around Jean Luc because she blushed a lot when he spoke to her and didn't seem to know what to do with her hands, whether to put them on her hips, or move them about, adjusting her hair. It got even worse when Jean Luc came out of the bathroom in his pirate costume, his smooth chest bare under his waistcoat, with a tiny trail of hairs starting at his belly button and disappearing into the waistband of his pants. Even at my age, I had an inkling of where the trail of hairs led.

Henri dressed as an accident victim, with a bandage wrapped around his head that oozed tomato sauce. Mum didn't blush when she spoke to him,

although in some respects, I think she liked Henri better, especially after he helped her pour drinks and finished cutting the crudités. We made all the food for the party ourselves – bowls of taramasalata and little skewers of cheese and pineapple that we poked into an orange until it resembled a hedgehog. Mum was worried that people wouldn't have enough to eat – almost as much as she was worried they would have too much to drink. Dad wasn't worried about anything. In fact, he arrived just before the other guests, ducking into the shower and changing into his costume – a sort of Italian playboy, with an open shirt and gold medallion – so that his hair was still sopping wet when they started to ring on the doorbell.

After Jean Luc and Henri, Pippa and Peggy were the first to arrive, with Pippa's friend Lulu in tow – there was no sign of her brother Harold, who was away at Oxford university, getting his expensive degree. Pippa and Lulu were dressed as French maids, in obscenely short dresses with miniature white aprons that exposed a pair of frilly black lace knickers at the back when they bent over. My dad spent a lot of time talking to Lulu as if she were the most fascinating person he had ever met, in between ferrying drinks from the bar to make sure she and Pippa had enough to drink. Lulu was at the crammer with Pippa, trying to get her A-levels, and sometimes babysat when Pippa was busy. Dad wasn't the only one to hang around them at the party. Henri and Jean Luc were like bees around a hive, showing off and prancing about, trying to get Lulu's attention.

Esther and I spent the first part of the evening ferrying coats between the hallway and my parents' bedroom, where we stacked them on the bed in neat rows – boys' jackets on one side and girls' on the other. We were trying to be helpful but we also wanted to try the best ones on, taking turns to admire our reflections in Mum's full-length mirror, until we had a fight over who should be the first to try on Peggy's black velvet coat and accidentally tore the sleeve. It was Esther's fault but I decided not to rat on

her because she was a guest and it would have seemed impolite to do so. We buried the coat at the bottom of the pile, hoping no one would notice.

We were in the bedroom much later on, looking for mischief, or anything really, as long as it was something we weren't supposed to be doing, when we heard giggling coming from the en suite bathroom next door. I told Esther to keep quiet while I approached the keyhole and squinted to get a better look. Behind me, I could feel Esther tugging at my clown suit, trying to peer over my shoulder and see through the door. "Don't stand so close. You're making it go all wobbly," I said, whispering as I shoved her away. This was *my* parents' bathroom, and I was going to get the first look.

Initially, I couldn't see anything except mist – the steam from the bathroom was making my glasses fog up. I wiped them off and looked again. This time, I could see a corner of the bath and one gold tap. If I closed one eye, I could see a bit more of the wall and a bit more of the taps. Disappointed, I pulled back and let Esther have a look.

"I can't see anything," she said.

"Maybe they're underwater?"

We skulked away from the door, back to the pile of coats, but we didn't get very far when we heard a sort of groan and then what sounded like a tidal wave of water splashing across the bathroom. We rushed back to the keyhole at the same time but I got there first, grabbing hold of the door handle and elbowing Esther out of the way.

"It's my bathroom," I said. "You're just a guest."

I looked through the keyhole again, but I couldn't focus on the gold tap – there was something in the way, something pink like a hand or maybe fatter, like a leg. Whatever it was, it was moving fast, slamming into another leg – no wait, it was a bottom, slippery with bubble bath and water. Now I could see there were two bodies, naked and glorious, doing something I had

never imagined could be done. I didn't feel embarrassed, just fascinated by the mechanics of it, the way the bodies fitted together and moved in and out.

Behind me, Esther was growing desperate. She grabbed hold of the yellow pom-pom on top of my clown hat and yanked me away from the door so that I fell backwards, clutching my neck where the chinstrap had dug in like a garrotte. Esther peered through the keyhole at the naked pink things bumping against the wall and recoiled in shock, letting out a loud squeal as she sprang away from the door. Hearing her squeal, I got a fright and let out a shriek of equal volume. Surely they had heard us inside the bathroom? We both ran from the door, as fast as our clown legs would carry us, tripping over each other to get away before anyone saw us.

Esther thought we should hide in my bedroom but I thought it was less conspicuous if we carried on mingling around the party as we had before. We headed for the kitchen, where Mum was cutting up a chocolate cake and arranging pieces of it on a plate. We offered to carry the cake around the party, handing out pieces to all the guests.

Mum was suspicious of our motives but she let us set off with a warning. "Make sure you don't take it straight to your bedroom."

Back in the lounge, the party was in full swing, with people dancing in the middle of the room to a Blondie song. They were jumping up and down, bumping into each other and slamming against the furniture. We went around the outside of the room, holding out the plate of cake but no one seemed hungry. I was surprised to see Jean Luc, fully clothed in his pirate outfit, talking to Lulu, who was flanked on the other side by my dad. Jean Luc and Lulu hadn't been the ones in the bathroom and it made me feel strangely disappointed. We looked around the party to see if anyone else was missing, but it was hard to tell, with so many people squeezed into one room and so many of them moving.

We only found out who it was by accident, when Peggy asked us if we would retrieve her coat from the bedroom. She was going home early,

she said, because she had an important deadline the next day. We were rummaging on my parents' bed for her coat when the door to the bathroom opened. Henri walked out first, his head bandage now dripping wet and wrapped around his neck, a red smudge where the tomato sauce had been. He was followed, moments later by Pippa, who wore her French maid's uniform at a jaunty angle and carried her fishnet stockings in her hand. We moved closer to the curtains, trying to hide in them, but unable to stop ourselves from staring at Pippa and Henri. Only Henri looked back and saw us, quivering by the window. In that instant he both smiled and winked, as if to say he knew it had been us, spying and squealing on the other side of the door, but he really didn't that we had watched. His gesture filled us both with a thrilling kind of shame.

Peggy noticed her ripped coat immediately. It had belonged to her mother, she told us, unable to hide her regret. "Did you see anyone suspicious, lurking in the bedroom?" she asked.

The fact that we had been guilty of two crimes on the same night was making me feel dizzy and reckless. "There were hundreds of coats on the bed," I said. "It probably just got tangled up with one of the others." I grabbed Esther by the hand and we marched downstairs, our bellies filled with dancing butterflies. This time, we went straight to my bedroom and stayed there, suspecting perhaps that we had reached the end of our luck.

When we woke up the next morning, the house was quiet, like a church. There were people sleeping on all the couches, including Jean Luc and Henri, but there was no sign of Pippa or Lulu. They must have gone home. We made our own breakfast and waited for the adults to stir, but they didn't seem to be in any hurry to wake up. We wanted to watch television, the Sunday morning cartoons, but it seemed rude to turn it on with so many people asleep. Later in the morning, Mum called me into her room and asked if I could go downstairs and fetch a bucket for Dad, which I did, the blue one from under the laundry sink. After I gave it to him and stood by the

side of my parents' bed, he groaned and told me to leave the room. I didn't really want to – I wanted to stay and see what was going to happen – but Mum gave me a gentle push in the direction of the door. When I got out onto the landing, I heard the release of liquid, of Dad's vomit cascading into the bowl.

By lunchtime, most people had gone home, even Esther. Jean Luc and Henri were still there, smoking cigarettes and coughing, in between sips of coffee that looked like tar. They started playing a rowdy game of hide and seek in the garden, running between the fruit trees and diving into the bushes, but they didn't seem to be too bothered about whether they could find each other or not. After several rounds of this amusement, they progressed to wrestling, puppy-like, on the lawn, rolling around and grabbing at each other's shirts. Then they discovered the hatch to the air-raid shelter and immediately, Jean Luc asked if we could go down.