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Funny Girl

Written by Nick Hornby

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Funny Girl

NICK HORNBY

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For Amanda, with love and gratitude, as ever.
And for Roger Gillett and Georgia Garrett.

Audition

I



She didn't want to be a beauty queen, but as luck would have it, she was about to become one.

There were a few aimless minutes between the parade and the announcement, so friends and family gathered round the girls to offer congratulations and crossed fingers. The little groups that formed reminded Barbara of liquorice Catherine wheels: a girl in a sugary bright pink or blue bathing suit at the centre, a swirl of dark brown or black raincoats around the outside. It was a cold, wet July day at the South Shore Baths, and the contestants had mottled, bumpy arms and legs. They looked like turkeys hanging in a butcher's window. Only in Blackpool, Barbara thought, could you win a beauty competition looking like this.

Barbara hadn't invited any friends, and her father was refusing to come over and join her, so she was stuck on her own. He was just sat there in a deckchair, pretending to read the *Daily Express*. The two of them would have made a tatty, half-eaten Catherine wheel, but even so, she would have appreciated the company. In the end, she went over to him. Leaving the rest of the girls behind made her feel half-naked and awkward, rather than glamorous and poised, and she had to walk past a lot of wolf-whistling spectators. When she reached her father's spot at the shallow end, she was probably fiercer than she wanted to be.

'What are you doing, Dad?' she hissed.

The people sitting near him, bored, mostly elderly holidaymakers, suddenly went rigid with excitement. One of the girls! Right in front of them! Telling her father off!

'Oh, hello, love.'

'Why wouldn't you come and see me?'

He stared at her as if she'd asked him to name the mayor of Timbuktu.

'Didn't you see what everyone else was doing?'

'I did. But it didn't seem right. Not for me.'

'What makes you so different?'

'A single man, running . . . amok in the middle of a lot of pretty girls wearing not very much. I'd get locked up.'

George Parker was forty-seven, fat, and old before he had any right to be. He had been single for over ten years, ever since Barbara's mother had left him for her manager at the tax office, and she could see that if he went anywhere near the other girls he'd feel all of these states acutely.

'Well, would you have to run amok?' Barbara asked. 'Couldn't you just stand there, talking to your daughter?'

'You're going to win, aren't you?' he said.

She tried not to blush, and failed. The holidaymakers within earshot had given up all pretence of knitting and reading the papers now. They were just gawping at her.

'Oh, I don't know. I shouldn't think so,' she said.

The truth was that she did know. The mayor had come over to her, whispered 'Well done' in her ear, and patted her discreetly on the bottom.

'Come off it. You're miles prettier than all the others. Tons.'

For some reason, and even though this was a beauty contest, her superior beauty seemed to irritate him. He never liked her showing off, even when she was making her friends and family laugh with some kind of routine in which she portrayed herself as dim or dizzy or clumsy. It was still showing off. Today, though, when showing off was everything, the whole point, she'd have thought he might forgive her, but no such luck. If you had to go and enter a beauty pageant, he seemed to be saying, you might at least have the good manners to look uglier than everyone else.

She pretended to hear parental pride, so as not to confuse her audience.

'It's a wonderful thing, a blind dad,' she said to the gawpers. 'Every girl should have one.'

It wasn't the best line, but she'd delivered it with a completely straight face, and she got a bigger laugh than she deserved. Sometimes surprise worked and sometimes people laughed because they were expecting to. She understood both kinds, she thought, but it was probably confusing to people who didn't take laughter seriously.

'I'm not blind,' said George flatly. 'Look.'

He turned around and widened his eyes at anyone showing any interest.

'Dad, you've got to stop doing that,' said Barbara. 'It frightens people, a blind man goggling away.'

'You . . .' Her father pointed rudely at a woman wearing a green mac. 'You've got a green mac on.'

The old lady in the next deckchair along began to clap, uncertainly, as if George had just that second been cured of a lifelong affliction, or was performing some kind of clever magic trick.

'How would I know that, if I was blind?'

Barbara could see that he was beginning to enjoy himself. Very

occasionally he could be persuaded to play the straight man in a double act, and he might have gone on describing what he could see for ever, if the mayor hadn't stepped up to the microphone and cleared his throat.

It was Auntie Marie, her father's sister, who suggested that she should go in for Miss Blackpool. Marie came round for tea one Saturday afternoon, because she happened to be passing, and casually dropped the competition into the conversation, and – a sudden thought – asked her why she'd never had a go, while her dad sat there nodding his head and pretending to be thunderstruck by the brilliance of the idea. Barbara was puzzled for the first minute or two, before she realized that the two of them had cooked up a plan. The plan, as far as she could work out, was this: Barbara entered the pageant, won it and then forgot all about moving to London, because there'd be no need. She'd be famous in her own hometown, and who could want for more? And then she could have a go at Miss UK, and if that didn't work out she could just think about getting married, when there would be another coronation, of sorts. (And that was a part of the beauty pageant plan too, Barbara was sure. Marie was quite sniffy about Aidan, thought she could do much better, or much richer, anyway, and beauty queens could take their pick. Dotty Harrison had married a man who owned seven carpet shops, and she'd only come third.)

Barbara knew she didn't want to be queen for a day, or even for a year. She didn't want to be a queen at all. She just wanted to go on television and make people laugh. Queens were never funny, not the ones in Blackpool anyway, or the ones in Buckingham Palace either. She'd gone along with Auntie Marie's scheme, though, because Dorothy Lamour had been Miss New Orleans and Sophia Loren had been a Miss Italy runner-up. (Barbara had always wanted to see a photograph of the girl who had beaten Sophia Loren.) And she'd gone along with it because she was bursting to get on with her life, and she needed something, anything, to happen. She knew she was going to break her father's heart, but first she wanted to show

him that she'd at least tried to be happy in the place she'd lived all her life. She'd done what she could. She'd auditioned for school plays, and had been given tiny parts, and watched from the wings while the talentless girls that the teachers loved forgot their lines and turned the ones they remembered into nonsense. She'd been in the chorus line at the Winter Gardens, and she'd gone to talk to a man at the local amateur dramatic society who'd told her that their next production was *The Cherry Orchard*, which 'probably wouldn't be her cup of tea'. He asked whether she'd like to start off selling tickets and making posters. None of it was what she wanted. She wanted to be given a funny script so that she could make it funnier.

She wished that she could be happy, of course she did; she wished she wasn't different. Her school friends and her colleagues in the cosmetics department at R. H. O. Hills didn't seem to want to claw, dig, wriggle and kick their way out of the town like she did, and sometimes she ached to be the same as them. And wasn't there something a bit childish about wanting to go on television? Wasn't she just shouting, 'Look at me! Look at me!' like a two-year-old? All right, yes, some people, men of all ages, did look at her, but not in the way that she wanted them to look. They looked at her blonde hair and her bust and her legs, but they never saw anything else. So she'd enter the competition, and she'd win it, and she was dreading the look in her father's eyes when he saw that it wasn't going to make any difference to anything.

The mayor didn't get around to it straight away, because he wasn't that sort of man. He thanked everyone for coming, and he made a pointless joke about Preston losing the Cup Final, and a cruel joke about his wife not entering this year because of her bunions. He said that the bevy of beauties in front of him – and he was just the sort of man who'd use the expression 'bevy of beauties' – made him even prouder of the town than he already was. Everyone knew that most of the girls were holidaymakers from Leeds and Manchester and Oldham, but he got an enthusiastic round of applause at that

point anyway. He went on for so long that she began to try and estimate the size of the crowd by counting the heads in one row of deckchairs and then multiplying by the number of rows, but she never finished because she got lost in the face of an old woman with a rain hat and no teeth, grinding a piece of sandwich over and over again. That was another ambition Barbara wanted to add to the already teetering heap: she wanted to keep her teeth, unlike just about every one of her relatives over the age of fifty. She woke up just in time to hear her name, and to see the other girls pretending to smile at her.

She didn't feel anything. Or rather, she noted her absence of feeling and then felt a little sick. It would have been nice to think that she'd been wrong, that she didn't need to leave her father and her town, that this was a dream come true and she could live inside it for the rest of her life. She didn't dare dwell on her numbness in case she came to the conclusion that she was a hard and hateful bitch. She beamed when the mayor's wife came over to put the sash on her, and she even managed a smile when the mayor kissed her on the lips, but when her father came over and hugged her she burst into tears, which was her way of telling him that she was as good as gone, that winning Miss Blackpool didn't even come close to scratching the itch that plagued her like chickenpox.

She'd never cried in a bathing suit before, not as a grown woman anyway. Bathing suits weren't for crying in, what with the sun and the sand and the shrieking and the boys with their eyes out on stalks. The feeling of wind-chilled tears running down her neck and into her cleavage was peculiar. The mayor's wife put her arms around her.

'I'm all right,' said Barbara. 'Really. I'm just being silly.'

'Believe it or believe it not, I know how you're feeling,' said the mayor's wife. 'This is how we met. Before the war. He were only a councillor then.'

'You were Miss Blackpool?' said Barbara.

She tried to say it in a way that didn't suggest amazement, but she wasn't sure she'd managed. The mayor and his wife were both large, but his size seemed intentional somehow, an indication of his

importance, whereas hers seemed like a terrible mistake. Perhaps it was just that he didn't care and she did.

'Believe it or believe it not.'

The two women looked at each other. These things happened. There was no need to say anything else, but then the mayor came over to them and said something else anyway.

'You wouldn't think so to look at her,' said the mayor, who was not a man to let the unspoken stay that way.

His wife rolled her eyes at him.

'I've already said "believe it or believe it not" twice. I've already admitted that I'm no Miss Blackpool any more. But you have to come clomping in anyway.'

'I didn't hear you say "believe it or believe it not".'

'Well I did. Twice. Didn't I, love?'

Barbara nodded. She didn't really want to be drawn in, but she thought she could offer the poor woman that much at least.

'Kiddies and cream buns, kiddies and cream buns,' said the mayor.

'Well, you're no oil painting,' his wife said.

'No, but you didn't marry me because I was an oil painting.'

His wife thought about this and conceded the point with silence.

'Whereas that was the whole point of you,' said the mayor. 'You were an oil painting. Anyways,' he said to Barbara. 'You know this is the biggest open-air baths in the world, don't you? And this is one of the biggest days here, so you've every right to feel overcome.'

Barbara nodded and snuffled and smiled. She wouldn't have known how to begin to tell him that the problem was exactly the opposite of the one he'd just described: it was an even smaller day than she feared it would be.

'That bloody Lucy woman,' her father said. 'She's got a lot to answer for.'

The mayor and his wife looked confused, but Barbara knew who he was talking about. She felt understood, and that made it worse.

Barbara had loved Lucille Ball ever since she saw *I Love Lucy* for the first time: everything she felt or did came from that. The world

seemed to stand still for half an hour every Sunday, and her father knew better than to try and talk to her or even to rustle the paper while the programme was on, in case she missed something. There were lots of other funny people she loved: Tony Hancock, Sergeant Bilko, Morecambe and Wise. But she couldn't be them even if she'd wanted to. They were all men. Tony, Ernie, Eric, Ernie . . . There was nobody called Lucy or Barbara in that lot. There were no funny girls.

'It's just a programme,' her father would say, before or after but never during. 'An American programme. It's not what I call British humour.'

'And British humour . . . That's your special phrase for humour from Britain, is it?'

'The BBC and so forth.'

'I'm with you.'

She only ever stopped teasing him because she got bored, never because he cottoned on and robbed the teasing of its point. If she had to stay in Blackpool, then one of her plans was to keep a conversation like this going for the rest of his life.

'She's not funny, for a start,' he said.

'She's the funniest woman who's ever been on television,' said Barbara.

'But you don't laugh at her,' said her father.

It was true that she didn't laugh, but that was because she'd usually seen the shows before. Now she was too busy trying to slow it all down so she could remember it. If there was a way of watching Lucy every single day of the week, then she would, but there wasn't, so she just had to concentrate harder than she'd ever concentrated on anything, and hope that some of it sank in.

'Anyway, you make me shut up when they're reading out the football results on the wireless,' she said.

'Yes, because of the pools,' he said. 'One of those football results might change our life.'

What she couldn't explain without sounding batty was that *I Love Lucy* was exactly the same as the pools. One day, one of Lucy's expressions or lines was going to change her life, and maybe even

his too. Lucy had already changed her life, although not in a good way: the show had separated her from everyone else – friends, family, the other girls at work. It was, she sometimes felt, a bit like being religious. She was so serious about watching comedy on the television that people thought she was a bit odd, so she'd stopped talking about it.

The photographer from the *Evening Gazette* introduced himself and ushered Barbara towards the diving boards.

'You're Len Phillips?' her father said. 'You're not pulling my leg?'

He recognized Len Phillips's name from the paper, so he was star-struck. Dear God, Barbara thought. And he wonders why I want to get out of here.

'Can you believe that, Barbara? Mr Phillips has come to the baths personally.'

'Call me Len.'

'Really? Thank you very much.' George looked a little uncomfortable, though, as if the honour had not yet been earned.

'Yes, well, he probably hasn't got a staff of thousands,' said Barbara.

'It's just me, and a lad sometimes,' said Len. 'And today's a big day for Blackpool. I'd be daft to let the lad do it.'

He gestured at Barbara to move back a little.

'Say cheese,' her father said. 'Or is it only amateurs who do that?'

'No, we do it too. Although sometimes I shout "Knickers!" just for a change.'

George laughed and shook his head in wonder. He was having the time of his life, Barbara could tell.

'No boyfriend?' Len asked.

'He couldn't get the day off, Len,' George said. He paused for a moment, clearly wondering whether he'd got too familiar, too soon. 'They're short-staffed, apparently, because of the holidays. Her Auntie Marie couldn't come either, because she's gone to the Isle of Man for a fortnight. Her first holiday for seven years. Only a caravan, but, you know. A change is as good as a rest.'

'You should be writing all this down, Len,' said Barbara. 'Caravan. Isle of Man. A change is as good as a rest. Is it just her and Uncle Jack, Dad? Or have the boys gone too?'

'He doesn't want to know all that,' said her father.

'Where does she work?' Len asked, nodding his head towards Barbara.

'I don't know. We could ask her,' said Barbara.

'She's in the cosmetics department at R. H. O. Hills,' her father said. 'And Aidan's in Menswear. That's how they met.'

'Well, she won't be there much now, will she?' said the photographer.

'Won't she?' said George.

'I'm always taking photographs of Miss Blackpool. Hospitals, shows, charity galas . . . She's got a lot of responsibilities. It'll be a busy year. We'll be seeing each other a lot, Barbara, so you'll have to get used to my ugly mug.'

'Oh, Lord,' said her father. 'Did you hear that, Barbara?'

Hospitals? Charity galas? An entire year? What had she been thinking? Auntie Marie had told her about the shop openings and the Christmas lights, but she hadn't thought about how she'd be letting people down if she just disappeared, and she hadn't thought about how she'd still be Miss Blackpool in three hundred and sixty-four days' time. She knew then that she didn't want to be Miss Blackpool in an hour's time.

'Where's she going?' said Len.

'Where are you going?' said her father.

Fifteen minutes later, the runner-up, Sheila Jenkinson, a tall, dopey redhead from Skelmersdale, was wearing the tiara, and Barbara and her father were in a taxi on their way back home. She left for London the following week.

2



Saying goodbye to her father was hard. He was afraid of being left alone, she knew that, but it didn't stop her. On the train down, she didn't know whether she was more upset by his grief and fear, or her own ruthlessness: she never once came close to changing her mind. Saying goodbye to Aidan was easy, though. He seemed relieved, and told her that he knew she'd cause trouble for him if she stayed in Blackpool. (He married someone else the following spring, and he caused her trouble for the next fifteen years.)

And London was easy too, as long as you didn't expect too much. She found a bed and breakfast near Euston Station, paid three days' lodging out of her savings, went to an employment bureau and got a job in Derry and Toms in Kensington High Street, on the cosmetics counter. All you had to do, it seemed, was ask for an inferior version of the life you'd had before and London would give it to you. London didn't mind where you came from either, as long as

you didn't mind the tobacconist and the bus conductor laughing and repeating your words back to you every time you opened your mouth. 'Toopence!' 'Piccadelleh!' 'Coopa tea!' Sometimes other customers and other passengers were invited to join in the hilarity.

A girl called Marjorie, who worked in Ladies' Shoes, offered her a double room in Earl's Court, much nearer to the store, and she agreed to take it before she'd realized that Marjorie would be in the double room with her.

She felt even more religious now: Lucille Ball had turned her into some kind of martyr to ambition. The kitchen window looked down over the railway line, and when a train went past, soot fell from the window frames on to the floor. In London, nearly all the money she earned went on food, rent and bus fares. Marjorie was every bit as lonely as Barbara, and she never went out anywhere, so the two of them spent too much time together. They lived off tinned soup and toast, and they never had enough sixpences for the gas fire. She couldn't watch Lucy, because she didn't have a TV set, so on Sunday afternoons her longing for home was particularly sharp. It didn't help, reminding herself that if she were back in Blackpool she'd spend the afternoon aching to be in London. It just made her feel that she'd never be happy anywhere. Sometimes she stopped and looked in the windows of employment agencies, but nobody seemed to need a television comedienne. Some nights she lay in bed and wept silently at her own stupidity. What had she thought was going to happen?

Marjorie told her that she should buy *The Stage* for the advertisements. There were a lot of girls, she said, who'd worked at Derry and Toms and read *The Stage* during their tea breaks, then disappeared.

'Would I have heard of any of them?' Barbara asked.

'Probably only Margie Nash,' said Marjorie. 'You must have heard us talking about her.'

Barbara shook her head, anxious for news of anyone who had found some kind of secret show-business tunnel out of the store.

'She was the one who was caught messing about with a customer in the gents' lav on the third floor, and then she owned up to stealing a skirt. She used to buy *The Stage* every week.'

And, undeterred by the cautionary tale of Margie Nash, so did Barbara, every Thursday, from the newspaper stall by Kensington High Street tube station. But she didn't understand a lot of it. It was full of notices that seemed to be written in code:

CALLS FOR NEXT WEEK

Shaftesbury – *Our Man Crichton*. Kenneth More, Millicent Martin, George Benson, David Kernan, Dilys Watling, Anna Barry, Eunice Black, Glyn Worsnip, Patricia Lambert (Delfont/Lewis/Arnold).

Who, precisely, was being called for next week? Not Kenneth More and Millicent Martin and the rest of them, surely? They must all have known that they were about to appear in a West End play. Was Barbara herself being called, or girls like her? And if there was any way that these mysterious calls might involve her, or anyone like her, how was she supposed to know how to respond to them? There was no date or time or job description. Lots of shows seemed to need soubrettes, but she didn't know what a soubrette was, and she didn't have a dictionary, and she didn't know where her nearest library was. If there wasn't an English word for it, though, then it was probably work best avoided, at least until she was really desperate.

The vacancies in the back of the paper were more straightforward, and she didn't need to look anything up. The Embassy Club in Old Bond Street wanted smart and attractive hostesses. The Nell Gwynne in Dean Street needed showgirls and/or dancers, but 'only lovely girls' were invited to apply. The Whisky A Go Go in Wardour Street required Pussies, minimum height 5ft 6in, but she suspected that height was not the only requirement, and she didn't want to know what the others might be.

She hated having to think about whether she was lovely enough to be a Pussy or a hostess or a showgirl. She feared that she wasn't

as lovely as she had been in Blackpool; or rather, her beauty was much less remarkable here. One day in the staff restaurant she counted on her fingers the girls who looked like real knockouts to her: seven. Seven skinny, beautiful creatures on her lunch break, in Derry and Toms alone. How many would there be on the next lunch break? How many on the cosmetics counters at Selfridges and Harrods and the Army and Navy?

She was pretty sure, though, that none of these girls wanted to make people laugh. That was her only hope. Whatever it was they cared about – and Barbara wasn't sure that they cared about very much – it wasn't that. Making people laugh meant crossing your eyes and sticking your tongue out and saying things that might sound stupid or naive, and none of those girls with their red lipstick and their withering contempt for anyone old or plain would ever do that. But that hardly gave her a competitive edge, not here, not yet. A willingness to go cross-eyed wasn't much use to her in Cosmetics. It probably wasn't what the Whisky A Go Go wanted from its Pussies either.

Barbara began to imagine the pretty girls working in Derry and Toms as beautiful tropical fish in a tank, swimming up and down, up and down, in serene disappointment, with nowhere to go and nothing to see that they hadn't seen a million times before. They were all waiting for a man. Men were going to scoop them up in a net and take them home and put them into an even smaller tank. Not all of them were waiting to *find* a man, because some of them had already found one, but it didn't stop the waiting. A few were waiting for a man to make up his mind and fewer still, the lucky ones, were waiting for a man who'd already made up his mind to make enough money.

Barbara wasn't waiting for a man, she didn't think, but she no longer knew what she was waiting for. She'd told herself on the train that she wouldn't even think about going home for two years, but after two months she could feel all the fight and the fire in her dying away, until the only thing she wanted was access to a TV set on a Sunday. That was what work had done to her – work and the

tinned soup, and Marjorie's adenoids. She'd forgotten all about turning herself into Lucy; she just wanted to see her on the screen somehow.

'Do you know anyone with a television?' she asked Marjorie one night.

'I don't really know anyone full stop,' said Marjorie.

It was Friday evening. She was draping stockings over the clothes horse by the gas fire. 'But most of the girls live like us.'

'Some of them must live at home,' said Barbara.

'Yes,' said Marjorie. 'You can befriend them and go to the pictures with them and go out dancing with them and one day they might invite you home for Sunday tea and you can watch their telly.'

'So it has to be a boyfriend.'

'You can go out with them and go dancing with them and go to the pictures with them and wrestle in doorways with them and . . .'

'All right,' said Barbara gloomily. 'I get the idea.'

'I'd say that the quickest way to a television is a gentleman friend. They're hard to find, but they exist.'

'You mean a rich man with a wife?'

'You said you were looking for a TV set, not eternal love. They've got flats hidden away. Or they can afford hotels. Nice hotels have television sets in their bedrooms.'

So Barbara was waiting for a man too, it turned out. Of course she was. What on earth had led her to believe that she could do something without one? Why did she always think she was different from everyone else? There was no point complaining about it. Or rather, she could complain all she wanted, as long as she was trying to meet a man at the same time, and as long as she kept the complaints to herself. Whoever this man was, he probably didn't want to spend all evening listening to her banging on about how unfair the world was. He wouldn't be that sort of chap, from the sound of it. She needed to change something, anything. She needed to meet someone who wasn't a bus conductor or a sales girl. There were opportunities somewhere. But they weren't in Cosmetics, and she didn't think they were in the Nell Gwynne.

'How do you know all this?' she asked Marjorie, who didn't strike her as someone who'd had a string of gentlemen friends.

'I used to have a friend in Coats and Furs,' said Marjorie. 'Some of the girls there had gentlemen friends. It never happens to anyone in Shoes, of course.'

'Why "of course"?'

'You must have noticed.'

'Noticed what?'

'Well, that's why we're in Shoes in the first place. Because we don't look like the sorts of girls who'd find themselves a gentleman friend.'

Barbara wanted to tell her not to be so silly, but she flicked through a few faces in her mind and recognized the truth of the observation. All the good-looking girls were in Cosmetics and Ladies' Fashion. There was a selection process that nobody had ever mentioned.

'Can you get yourself a couple of days in Perfume?' said Marjorie.

'Why Perfume?'

'Cosmetics isn't so good. You don't get men buying lipstick and mascara so much, do you?'

Marjorie was right about this as well. Barbara couldn't remember the last time she'd served a man.

'But they buy perfume as presents. They get all flirty when they're buying it, too. They want you to spray it on your wrists and then take your hand so they can sniff.'

Barbara had seen this back home in R. H. O. Hills, but not often, and it was never done with any real intent. People were more careful in a small town. If somebody's husband tried something on, his wife would find out soon enough.

'Listen,' said Marjorie. 'A gentleman friend isn't interested in wrestling. I just thought I should warn you.'

Barbara was surprised. 'What is he interested in, then? If he's not interested in, you know, *that*.'

'Oh, he's interested in *that*. Just not the wrestling part.'

'I'm not sure I get you.'

'He won't want to wrestle. Wrestling's for kids.'

'But if he's a gentleman . . .'

'I think the word "gentleman" in "gentleman friend" is like the word "public" in "public schools". It actually means the opposite, when you put it with something else. You're not a virgin, are you?'

'Of course not,' said Barbara.

The truth was that she wasn't sure. There had been some sort of business with Aidan, right before the beauty pageant. She had decided that she wanted to be unencumbered before coming to London. He'd been hopeless, though, and she was consequently unsure of her official status.

'Well, be warned, that's all. They're not messing about.'

'Thank you.'

Marjorie looked at her, apparently exasperated.

'You do know what you look like, don't you?'

'No. I thought I did, before I came down to London. But it's different here. There's a different scale. All those girls in Cosmetics and Ladies' Fashion, and then when you go out on to Kensington High Street . . .'

'All those little stick insects?' said Marjorie. 'You don't need to worry about them. All right, you're not very with it. But men don't care about that. You're ridiculous.'

'Oh,' said Barbara. 'Thank you.'

'You're like Sabrina.'

Barbara tried not to roll her eyes. She hated Sabrina, the girl who just stood in front of the camera on the *Arthur Askey Show*, smiling and showing off her silly bust. She was and did the opposite of what Barbara wanted to be and to do.

'You've got the bosom, the waist, the hair, the legs, the eyes . . . If I thought that murdering you with a meat cleaver, this minute, would get me half what you've got, I'd slice you up without a second's thought and watch you bleed to death like a stuck pig.'

'Thank you,' said Barbara.

She thought she'd focus on the compliment, rather than the



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terrifying glimpse she'd been given into her flatmate's soul. She found herself particularly worried by Marjorie's willingness to do all that, the slicing and the bleeding and the murdering, for only a percentage of the advantages she envied. There was something in this compromise that made it seem more real than Barbara wanted it to be.

'You shouldn't be in of an evening, watching me dry my underwear. You should be entering beauty competitions.'

'Don't be daft,' said Barbara. 'What would I want to do anything like that for?'

The next day, Barbara asked a girl she knew on the perfume counter to swap with her for an afternoon, just to see how easy it was to find a gentleman friend. The results of the experiment were startling: you just had to turn on the light indicating that you were looking for one. Barbara was glad she hadn't known where the switch was during her teenage years, because she'd have got herself into all sorts of trouble in Blackpool – trouble caused by married men who owned seven carpet shops, or who sang in the shows at the Winter Gardens.

Valentine Laws wasn't much of a catch. She should probably have thrown him back in, but she wanted to get on with it. He was at least fifteen years older than her, and he smelled of pipe tobacco and Coal Tar soap. The first time he came to the perfume counter, he was wearing a wedding ring, but when he came back a couple of minutes later, apparently for a longer look at her, it was gone. He didn't speak to her until his third lap.

'So,' he said, as if the conversational well had momentarily run dry. 'Do you get out much yourself?'

'Oh, you know,' she said. 'Not as much as I'd like.'

' "Mooch",' he said. 'Lovely. Where are you from? Let me guess. I'm good at this. I know it's somewhere oop north, but where, that is the question. Yorkshire?'

'Lancashire. Blackpool.'

He stared, unembarrassed, at her chest.

'Sabrina comes from Blackpool, doesn't she?'

'I don't know who Sabrina is,' said Barbara.

'Really? I'd have thought you'd all be very proud of her.'

'Well, we're not,' said Barbara. 'Because we've never heard of her.'

'Anyway, she looks like you,' said Valentine Laws.

'Bully for her.'

He smiled and ploughed on. He was clearly not interested in her conversational skills. He was interested in her because she looked like Sabrina.

'Well, Miss Blackpool.' She looked at him, startled, but it was just a line. 'What sort of places would you like to go to?'

'That's for me to know and you to find out.'

She could have kicked herself. That was a tone she'd have used back home to slap away a Teddy Boy at the Winter Gardens, but it was no use to her here. She was wrestling, and Marjorie had warned her not to wrestle. Luckily for her, and perhaps because he wasn't accustomed to the snap and snarl of Saturday night dance halls, he ignored her little flash of haughtiness.

'I'm trying,' he said patiently. 'But I have a proposal to make to you.'

'I'll bet,' she said.

She couldn't help herself. All her life, or the part of it in which men were interested, she'd been trying to fend them off. Now, suddenly, she had to be different and suppress the reflex she'd needed for years.

'And you'd be right to bet. You'd win money. I wouldn't be talking to you if there were no proposal, would I?'

She appreciated the brutal clarification and smiled.

'I'm meeting a friend for dinner. A client. He's bringing a lady friend, and suggested I should too.'

In her past life, she would have mentioned his wedding ring, but she had learned something.

'That sounds nice.'

She was still a long way from a television set, but it was a start.

Marjorie advised her to borrow something to wear from work. That's what all the other girls did, apparently. She went upstairs in


TALK
OF THE
TOWN
HIPPODROME
THEATRE RESTAURANT
dining
dancing
SPECTACULAR
NINE TAILS REVUE
AND
THE SEEKERS
PRODUCTION BY
ROBERT
NESBITT
PICCADILLY
FILTER
NO
RIGHT
TURN
THE SEEKERS

her lunch hour with a bag, had a word with one of the girls, took away a smart knee-length red dress with a plunging neckline. When she was getting ready to go out, she remembered what she could look like, when she made an effort, put on some lipstick, showed a bit of leg. It had been a while.

'Bloody hell,' said Marjorie, and Barbara smiled.

Valentine Laws had booked a table at the Talk of the Town to see Matt Monro, Auntie Marie's favourite singer. On the posters at the entrance, Barbara saw that on other nights it might have been the Supremes, or Helen Shapiro, or Cliff and the Shadows, people that the girls at work would have wanted to hear all about. Matt Monro was from another time, the time that she'd left Blackpool to escape. As she was shown to the table, she noticed that she was easily the youngest person in the room.

He was waiting for her at a table for four at the side of the stage. His other guests hadn't arrived. He ordered her a Dubonnet and lemonade without asking her, and they talked about work, and London, and nightclubs, and then he looked up and smiled.

'Sidney!'

But Sidney, a small, bald man with a moustache, didn't seem pleased to see Valentine, and then Valentine's face became too complicated for Barbara to read. There was the smile, then the smile vanished, and then there was a quick, shocked widening of the eyes. And then a smile returned, but it contained no warmth or pleasure.

'Audrey!' said Valentine.

Audrey was a large woman in an extremely purple and inappropriately long dress. She was, Barbara guessed, Sidney's wife. And as Barbara watched, she began to see that there had been some kind of misunderstanding. Sidney had thought that it was a night out with one kind of lady ('the ladies', 'our good lady wives', that sort of thing), but Valentine had invited Barbara on the assumption that it was another sort of night out altogether, one involving *ladies* but not *the* ladies. Presumably they had enjoyed both kinds of

evening in the past, hence the confusion. The lives of married men with money were so complicated and so deceitful, the codes they spoke in so ambiguous, that Barbara wondered why this sort of thing didn't happen all the time. Perhaps it did. Perhaps the Talk of the Town was full of tables at which women of wildly different ages were sitting, all glowering at each other.

'Valentine and I have a tiny bit of business to discuss at the bar,' said Sidney. 'Please excuse us for five minutes.'

Valentine stood up, nodded at the women and followed Sidney, who was stomping away angrily. It was a misunderstanding with consequences, obviously. Sidney's good lady wife would realize who Barbara was and what she represented; she would presumably work out that there had been other, similar evenings to which she hadn't been invited. If Valentine had been quicker on the uptake he could have introduced Barbara as his cousin, or his secretary, or his parole officer, but he'd allowed himself to be dragged away by Sidney for an ear-bashing, and left the two women to come to their own conclusions.

Audrey sat down heavily opposite Barbara and looked at her.

'He's married, you know,' she said eventually.

Barbara very much doubted that she'd still be around to hear Matt Monro sing, so she thought she may as well have as much fun as she could. She looked at Audrey and laughed, immediately and scornfully.

'To who?' she said. 'I'll kill her.' And she laughed again, just to show how unconcerned she was by Audrey's news.

'He's married,' said Audrey insistently. 'To Joan. I've met her. He's been married a long time. Kids and everything. They're not even kids any more. The lad is sixteen and his daughter's at nursing college.'

'Well,' said Barbara, 'he can't be doing a very good job of bringing them up. He hasn't spent a night away from home for two years.'

'Home?' said Audrey. 'You live together?'

'Oh, it's not as bad as it looks,' said Barbara. 'We're supposed to

be getting married next June. Although obviously if what you're saying is true, he's got some sorting out to do first.' And she laughed for a third time, and shook her head at the preposterousness of it all. Valentine! Married! With kiddies!

'Have you met these "children"?'

'Well,' said Audrey, 'no.' A tiny worm of doubt had crept in, Barbara noted with satisfaction. 'But I've talked to Joan about them. Sidney and I have two teenagers of our own.'

'Ah,' said Barbara. 'Talking. We can all talk. I could pop fifteen children out, talking to you now. Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop . . .'

Fifteen children meant way too many pops, she now realized. She'd seem insane if she kept going, so she stopped.

'Five anyway,' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'Talking's not the same as seeing, is it?'

'Are you saying that Joan made them up?'

'To be honest, I think this Joan might be made up.'

'How can she be made up? I met her!'

'Yes, but you know what they're like. Sometimes they want an evening out without us, if you know what I mean. It's harmless enough. Well, I think so.'

'You're saying that Joan was some sort of . . .'

'No, no. He just wanted some company. I was probably at the pictures or somewhere.'

'She wasn't a young woman,' said Audrey.

'Well, that's quite sweet, that he wanted to spend an evening with someone of his own age.'

Audrey contemplated the elaborate fraud that had been perpetrated on her and shook her head.

'I can't believe it,' she said. 'What an odd thing to do.'

Sidney and Valentine came back to the table, friends again.

'I should introduce you two properly,' said Valentine. 'Audrey, this is Barbara. She works in my office and she's nuts about Matt Monro. So when Joan fell ill this afternoon . . .'

Sidney's wife looked at her, confused and then outraged.

'Nice to meet you, Audrey,' said Barbara, and she went to get her coat.

There had been a strange enjoyment in the few minutes she'd spent talking to Audrey because they'd allowed her to appear in a comedy sketch that she'd written herself, on the spot. It had been a half-decent performance too, she thought, considering the thinness of the material. But then the adrenalin left her body, and as she queued for the cloakroom, she felt as blue as she'd ever been in London. Since her conversation with Marjorie, she had been telling herself that her choice was clear, if dismal: she could work behind cosmetics counters, or she could pick up men like Valentine Laws, in the hope that they would take her somewhere a few inches closer to where she wanted to be. But she had picked up a man like Valentine Laws, and she'd ended up feeling cheap and foolish, and she would be back behind the cosmetics counter the following day anyway. She wanted to cry. She certainly wanted to go home. She'd had enough. She would go home and marry a man who owned carpet shops, and she would bear his children, and he would take other women to nightclubs, and she would get old and die and hope for better luck next time around.

And on the way out of the Talk of the Town, she met Brian.

She nearly bumped into him as she was walking up the stairs to the entrance. He said hello, and she told him to bugger off, and he looked startled.

'You don't remember me, do you?'

'No,' she said, and she was glad that she didn't. He clearly hadn't been worth remembering. He was handsome enough, and he was wearing what looked like a very expensive suit, but he was even older than Valentine Laws. Everything about him was untrustworthy.

'We met at the first night of that Arthur Askey film you were in.'

'I've never been in any film.'

'Oh,' he said. 'Sorry. You're not Sabrina, are you?'

'No, I'm bloody not bloody Sabrina. Bloody Sabrina is bloody

years older than me. And yes, she comes from the same place, and yes, she's got a big bust. But if any of you ever looked above a woman's neck, you might learn to tell us apart.'

He chuckled.

'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I'm glad you're not her. It wasn't a very good film and she was hopeless in it. Where are you going anyway?'

'Home.'

'You can't go home yet. Matt Monro hasn't even started, has he?'

'Why can't I go home?'

'Because you should stay and have a drink. I want to know all about you.'

'I'll bet you do.'

She could wrestle with this man, because she wanted nothing from him and she was sick of all men anyway.

'I'm not who you think I am,' he said.

'I don't think you're anybody.'

'I'm very happily married,' he said.

Suddenly there was a smiling, attractive woman by his side. She was a little bit younger than him, but nothing scandalous.

'Here she is,' said the man. 'This is my wife.'

'Hello,' said the woman. She didn't seem to be angry with Barbara. She just wanted to be introduced.

'I'm Brian Debenham,' he said. 'And this is Patsy.'

'Hello,' said Patsy. 'You're so pretty.'

Barbara started to imagine what this could be about. A husband and wife trying to pick her up came from somewhere right on the fringes of her imagination. She didn't even have a word for it.

'I'm trying to persuade her to have a drink with us,' said Brian.

'I can see why,' said Patsy, and she looked Barbara up and down. 'She's right up your street. She looks like Sabrina.'

'I don't think she likes it when people say that.'

'I don't,' said Barbara. 'And I don't like it when a man tries to pick me up while his wife is watching.'

That seemed the safest interpretation. If she didn't have a word

for the other thing, she wouldn't try to accuse them of it. She was definitely going to find out what a soubrette was. For all she knew, they were trying to turn her into one.

Brian and Patsy laughed.

'Oh, I'm not trying to pick you up,' he said. 'It's not sex. It's something even dirtier. I want to make money out of you. I'm a theatrical agent.'

Barbara went back to the cloakroom with her coat, and that's when it all started.