Lovereading.co.uk

Class

Jane Beaton

Published by Sphere

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

SPHERE

First published in Great Britain as a paperback original
in 2008 by Sphere

Copyright © Jane Beaton 2008

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

'The Choosing' by Liz Lochhead from *Dreaming Frankenstein and Collected Poems* is reproduced by permission of Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd. www.birlinn.co.uk
'Christmas' © Sir John Betjeman by kind permission of the Estate of John Betjeman
'The Crystal Set' © Kathleen Jamie 1995
'Journey of the Magi' by T. S. Eliot reproduced by kind permission of Faber Ltd/The T. S. Eliot Estate

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-4060-4

Typeset in Palatino by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Papers used by Sphere are natural, renewable and recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests and certified in accordance with the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council.



Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

Characters

Staff

Headteacher: Dr Veronica Deveral
Administrator: Miss Evelyn Prenderghast
Deputy Headteacher: Miss June Starling

Cook: Mrs Joan Rhys
Caretaker: Mr Harold Carruthers

Physics: Mr John Bart
Music: Mrs Theodora Offili
French: Mademoiselle Claire Crozier
English: Miss Margaret Adair
Maths: Miss Ella Beresford
PE: Miss Janie James
Drama: Miss Fleur Parsley

Governors

Dame Lydia Johnson
Majabeen Gupta
Digory Gill

Pupils

Middle School Year One

Sylvie Brown
Imogen Fairlie
Simone Kardashian
Andrea McCann
Felicity Prosser
Zazie Saurisse
Alice Trebizon-Woods
Astrid Ulverton
Ursula Wendell

Chapter One

Purple skirt *no*. Grey suit *yes* but it was in a crumpled ball from an unfortunate attack of dry cleaner phobia. Black, definitely *not*. Ditto that Gaviscon-pink frilly coat jacket thing she'd panic bought for a wedding and couldn't throw away because it had cost too much, but every time she came across it in her wardrobe it made her shiver and question the kind of person she was.

Job interviews. Torture from the pits of hell. Especially job interviews four hundred miles away which require clothing which will both look fantastic and stand up to seven hours in Stan's Fiat Panda, with its light coating of crisps. Oh, and that would do the job both for chilly Scotland and the warm English riviera. God, it sucked not being able to take time off sometimes.

Maggie Adair looked at herself critically in the mirror and decided to drive to Cornwall in her pyjamas.

Fliss was having a lie in – among the last, she thought, of her entire life.

I can't believe they're making me do this, she thought. I can't believe they're sending me away. And if they think they're fooling me with their jolly hockey-sticks utter bloody bollocks they can think again. Of course Hattie loves it, she

bloody loves anything that requires the brain of a flea, a tennis racket, a boys' school on the hill and eyelash curlers.

Well I'm not going to bloody love it. I'll sit it out till they realise how shit it is and they'll let me go to Guildford Academy like everyone else, not some nobs' bloody hole two hundred miles away. Why should I care about being sent so far from London just as everyone else is getting to go to Wembley concerts and on the tube on their own? I'm nearly fourteen, for God's sake. I'm a teenager. And now I'm going to be buried alive in bloody Cornwall. Nobody ever thinks about me.

I'll show them. I'll be home after a month.

Breakfast the next morning was even worse. Fliss pushed her All-Bran round her plate. No way was she eating this muck. She'd pass it on to Ranald (the beagle) but she didn't think he would eat it either. She patted his wet nose, and felt comforted.

'And I don't know for sure,' Hattie was saying, 'but I think they're going to make me prefect! One of the youngest ever!'

'That's wonderful, sweetie,' their mother was saying. 'And you can keep an eye out for Fliss.'

Fliss rolled her eyes. 'Great. Let everyone know the big swotty prefect is my sister. NO thank you.'

Hattie bit her lip. Even though she was eighteen months older, Fliss could still hurt her. And she wasn't *that* big.

'Behave yourself,' said their father. 'I don't want to hear you speaking like that.'

'Fine,' said Fliss, slipping down from the table. 'You don't have to hear me speaking *at all*. That's why you're sending me away, remember?' And she made sure the conservatory doors banged properly behind her as she mounted the stairs.

'Is she really only thirteen?' said her mother. 'Do we really have to put up with this for another six years?'

'Hmm?' said her father, buried under the *FT*. Selective hearing, he reckoned. That's all you needed. Though he couldn't help contrasting his sweet placid elder daughter with this little firecracker. Boarding school was going to be just what she needed, sort her out.

Dr Veronica Deveral couldn't believe they were still interviewing for staff three weeks before the beginning of term. It showed a lack of professionalism she just couldn't bear. She glanced in the mirror, then reached out a finger to smooth the deep furrow between her eyes. Normally she was without a hint of vanity, but the start of the new school year brought anxieties all of its own, even after thirty years, and Mrs Ferrers waiting for the very last minute to jump ship to Godolphin was one of them.

So now she was short of an English teacher; and with eighty new girls soon turning up – some scared, some weepy, some excited, some defiant, and all of them needing a good confident hand. She put on her reading glasses and turned back to the pile of CVs. She missed the days when she didn't need CVs, with their gussied up management language, and fancy euphemisms about child-centred learning, instead of simple common sense. A nicely typed letter without spelling mistakes and a quick once-over to see if they were the right stuff – that used to be all she needed.

Still, she mused, gazing out of the high window of her office, over the smooth lawns – quiet and empty, at least for a few more weeks – and up to the rocky promontory above the sea, which started just beyond the bounds of the school. It wasn't all bad. These ghastly 'inclusiveness' courses the board had suggested she attend – no one would ever instruct

Veronica to do anything – had been quite interesting in terms of expanding the range of people the girls could work with.

They had such hermetic upbringings, so many of them. Country house, London house, nannies and the best schools. Oh, there was divorce and absent parenting, and all the rest, but they still existed in a world in which everyone had help; no one had to worry about money or even getting a job. Now, wasn't there an application somewhere from a woman teaching in a Glasgow housing estate? Perhaps she should have another glass of mint tea and look at it again.

'La dee dah.'

'Shut it,' Simone said.

'La dee dah.'

'Mum! He's doing it again!'

'Joel!'

'I'm not doing *anyfink*.'

Simone tried to ignore him and concentrate on an early spell of packing, which was hard when he wouldn't get out of her tiny bedroom. And, even more irritating, she could kind of see his point. Even she'd winced at the straw boater, and the winter gloves on the uniform list, though at first she'd been so excited. Such a change from the ugly burgundy sweatshirt and optional (i.e., everyone wore them if you didn't want to get called a 'slut') grey trousers and black shoes at St Cats.

She tried to ignore her annoying younger brother, and bask once again in the memory of the day they'd got the letter. Not the months and months of long study that had gone on before it. Not the remarks from her classmates, which had got even more unpleasant the more she'd stayed behind and begged the teachers for extra work and more coaching – most of the third years were of the firm conviction

that she'd had sex with every single teacher in the school, male and female, in return for the highest predicted GCSE grades the school had ever seen, not that there'd been much to beat.

She'd tried her best to keep her head high, even when she was being tripped in the corridor; when she couldn't open any door without glances and whispers in her direction; when she'd spent every break-time and lunchtime hiding in a corner of the library (normally forbidden, but she'd got special permission).

No, she was going back to the day the letter came. In a heavy, thick, white envelope. '*Dear Mr & Mrs Kardashian . . . we are pleased to inform you that your daughter Simone . . . full scholarship . . . enclosed, clothing suppliers . . .*'

Her father hadn't said very much, he'd had to go out of the room for a minute. Half delighted – he'd never dreamed when he'd arrived in Britain that one day his daughter would be attending a private school – he was also annoyed that, even though it was a great opportunity for Simone, he wasn't paying for it himself. And he worried too for his sensitive daughter. She'd nearly worked herself ill for the entrance exams. Would she be able to keep up?

Simone's mum however had no such reservations. She flung her arms around Simone, screaming in excitement.

'She just wants to tell everyone,' said Joel. But Simone hadn't cared. She'd been too busy taking it all in. No more St Cats. No more burgundy sweatshirts. No more Joel! No more being paraded in front of Mamma's friends ('no, not pretty, no. But *so* clever! You wouldn't believe how clever!'). Her life started now.

It had to be around here somewhere. Just as she was ferreting with one hand for the last of the Maltesers in the bottom

of her bag, Maggie crested the hill in the car. And there it was.

The school most resembled a castle, perched by the sea. It had four towers – four houses, Maggie firmly told herself, trying to remember. Named after English royal houses, that was right. Wessex; Plantagenet; York and Tudor. No Stuart, she noted ruefully. Maggie mentally contrasted the imposing buildings with the wet, grey single-storey seventies build she'd left behind her up in Scotland.

Uh oh, she thought. What was it Stan had said? 'The second you get in there you'll get a chip on your shoulder the size of Govan. All those spoilt mimsies running about. You'll hate it.'

Mind you, it wasn't like Stan was exactly keen for her to broaden her horizons. He'd been in the same distribution job since he left school. Spreading his wings wasn't really in his vocabulary. But maybe it would be different for her. Let's face it, there had to be more out there than teaching in the same school she grew up in and having Sunday lunch round her mum's? She had to at least see.

Veronica Deveral rubbed her eyes. Only her third candidate, and she felt weary already.

'So,' she asked the wide-eyed young woman sitting in front of her. 'How would you cope with a difficult child . . . say, for example, one who doesn't think she should be here?'

The woman, who was wearing pale blue eyeliner that matched both her suit and her tights, and didn't blink as often as she should, leaned forward to show enthusiasm.

'Well,' she said, in refined tones that didn't quite ring true – junior acting classes thought Veronica – 'I'd try and establish a paradigm matrix of acceptable integral behaviours, and follow that up with universal quality monitoring

and touch/face time. I think non-goal orientated seeking should be minimised wherever appropriate.'

There was a silence.

'Well, er, thank you very much for coming in Miss . . .'

'Oh, I just like the kids to call me Candice. Promotes teacher–pupil sensitivity awareness,' said Candice sincerely.

Veronica smiled without using her lips and decided against pouring them both another cup of tea.

Getting changed in a Fiat Panda isn't as much fun as it looks. Maggie tried to imagine doing this in the car park of Holy Cross without getting a penknife in the bahookie, and couldn't manage it. But here, hidden out of sight on the grey gravel drive, it was at least possible, if lacking in the elegance stakes.

She put her make-up on using the car mirror. Pink cheeks, windswept from having the windows open for the last hundred miles, air-con not quite having reached Stan's mighty machine. Her dark, thickly waving hair – which, when properly brushed out by a hairdresser was really rather lovely but the rest of the time required lion taming – was a bit frizzed, but she might be able to get away with it by pulling it into a tight bun. In fact, frizzy hair in tight buns was exactly what she'd expect a boarding-school teacher to wear, so she might be right at home. She smoothed down her skirt, took a deep breath and left the car. Straight ahead of her, the sun glistened off the choppy sea. She could probably swim here in the mornings, lose the half stone caused by huddling in the staffroom ever since she'd left college two years before, mainlining caramel wafers in an attempt to forget the horror that was year 3.

Maggie stepped out onto the gravel drive. Up close, the building was even more impressive; an elaborate Victorian

confection, built in 1880 as an adjunct to the much older boy's school at the other end of the cove, the imposing building giving off an air of seriousness and calm.

She wondered what it would be like full of pupils. Or perhaps they were serious and calm too. At the very least they were unlikely to have ASBOs. Already she'd been impressed by the amount of graffiti on the old walls of the school: none. Nothing about who was going to get screwed, about who was going to get knifed . . . nothing at all.

No. She wasn't going to think about what it would be like to work here. This was just an experiment, just to see what else was out there before she went back to her mum and dad's, and Stan, in Govan. Where she belonged. She thought of Stan from weeks earlier, when she'd talked about applying.

'"Teacher required for single sex boarding school",' she read out. '"Beautiful location. On-site living provided. English, with some sports".'

Stan sniffed.

'Well, that's you out then. What sports are you going to teach? Running to the newsagents to get an Aero?'

'I'm trained in PT, thank you!' said Maggie sniffily.

'It'll be funny posh sports anyway, like polo, and lacrosse.' He snorted to himself.

'What?'

'Just picturing you playing polo.'

Maggie breathed heavily through her nose.

'Why?'

'You're frightened of horses, for one. And you'd probably crush one if you keep on eating bacon sandwiches like that.'

'Shut up!' said Maggie. 'Do you think being Scottish counts as being an ethnic minority? It says they're trying to encourage entries from everywhere. Apply in writing in the first instance to Miss Prenderghast . . .'

'A girls' school with free accommodation?' said Stan. 'Where do I sign up?' He thought she was only doing this to annoy him, even when the interview invitation arrived.

'Dear Ms Adair,' he'd read out in an absurdly over-exaggerated accent. 'Please do us the most gracious honour of joining us for tea and crumpet with myself, the queen and . . .'

'Give that back,' she'd said, swiping the letter, which had come on heavy cream vellum paper, with a little sketch of the Downey school printed on it in raised blue ink. It simply requested her presence for a meeting with the headmistress, but reading it had made her heart pound a bit. It did feel a bit like being summonsed.

'I don't know why you're wasting your time,' Stan had said, as she'd worried over whether or not to take the purple skirt. 'A bunch of bloody poncey southern snobs, they're never going to look at you anyway.'

'I know,' said Maggie, crossly folding up her good bra.

'And even if they did, you're not going to move to Cornwall, are you?'

'I'm sure I'm not. It's good interview experience, that's all.'

'There you go then. Stop messing about.'

But as they lay in bed in the evening, Stan snoring happily away, pizza crumbs still round his mouth, Maggie lay there imagining. Imagining a world of beautiful halls; of brand new computers for the kids that didn't get broken immediately. Books that didn't have to be shared. Bright, healthy, eager faces, eager to learn; to have their minds opened.

It wasn't that she didn't like her kids. She just found them so wearing. She just wanted a change, that was all. So why, when she mentioned it, did everyone look at her like she'd just gone crazy?

*

The main entrance to the school was two large wooden doors with huge circular wrought-iron door knockers, set under a carved stone lintel on which faded cut letters read *multa ex hoc ludo accipies; multa quidem fac ut reddas*. Maggie hoped she wouldn't be asked to translate them as one of the interview questions. The whole entrance-way, from the sweep of the gravel drive to the grand view out to sea, seemed designed to impress, and did so. In fact it hardly even smelled of school – that heady scent of formaldehyde, trainers, uneaten vegetables and cheap deodorant Maggie had got to know so well. Maybe it was because of the long holiday, or maybe girls just didn't smell so bad, but at Holy Cross it oozed from the walls.

The doors entered on to a long black and white tiled corridor, lined with portraits and photographs – of distinguished teachers and former pupils, Maggie supposed. Suddenly she felt herself getting very nervous. She thought back to her interview with James Gregor at Holy Cross. 'Good at animal taming are you?' he'd said. 'Good. Our staff turnover is 20 per cent a year, so you will forgive me if I don't take the trouble to get to know you too well just yet.'

And she'd been in. And he'd been right. No wonder Stan was bored with her looking at other options. After all, college had been great fun. Late nights out with the girls, skipping lectures, going to see all the new bands at King Tut's and any other sweaty dive where students got in free. Even her teaching experience had been all right – a little farm school in Sutherland where the kids didn't turn up in autumn (harvest) or winter (snowed in), and had looked at her completely bemused when she'd asked the first year to write an essay about their pets.

'What's a pet, miss?'

'My dad's got three snakes. Are they pets, miss? But he just keeps them for the rats.'

Then she'd come back to Glasgow, all geared up and ready for her new career, only to find that, with recruitment in teachers at an all-time high, the only job she could find was at her old school, Holy Cross. Her old school where the boys had pulled her hair, and the girls had pulled the boys' hair and it was rough as guts, right up till that moment in fifth year when big lanky Stanley Mackintosh had loped over in his huge white baseball boots and shyly asked her if she wanted to go and see some band some mate of his was in.

The band sucked; or they might have been brilliant, Maggie wasn't paying attention and no one heard of them ever again. No, she was too busy snogging a tall, lanky, big-eared bloke called Stan up at the back near the toilet and full of excited happiness.

Of course, that was six years ago. Now, Stan was working down the newspaper distributors – he'd started as a paper boy and never really gone away, although it did mean he was surprisingly well informed for someone who played as much Championship Manager as he did – and she was back at Holy Cross. They never even went to gigs any more, since she left college and didn't get cheap entry to things, and she was always knackered when she got home anyway, and there was always marking.

Back in Govan. And it didn't matter that she was still young, just out of college – to the students, she was 'miss', she was ancient, and she was to be taken advantage of by any means necessary. She'd ditched the trendy jeans and tops she'd worn to lectures, and replaced them with plain skirts and tops that gave the children as little chance to pick on her as possible – she saw her dull tweedy wardrobe as

armour. They still watched out to see if she wore a new lipstick or different earrings, whereupon they would try and turn it into a conversation as prolonged and insulting as possible.

Once she'd dreamed of filling young hearts and minds with wonderful books and poetry; inspiring them, like Robin Williams, to think beyond their small communities and into the big world. Now she just dreamed of crowd control, and keeping them quiet for ten bloody minutes without someone whacking somebody else or answering their hidden mobiles. They'd caught a kid in fourth year with a knife again the other day. It was only a matter of time before one got brandished in class. She just hoped to God it wasn't her class. She needed to learn another way.

The elegant tiled corridor leading off the grand entrance hall at Downey House towards the administrative offices was so quiet Maggie found she was holding her breath. She looked at the portrait right in front of her: a stern looking woman, who'd been headmistress during the Second World War. Her hair looked like it was made of wrought iron. She wondered how she'd looked after the girls then, girls who were worried about brothers and fathers; about German boats coming ashore, even down here. She shivered and nearly jumped when a little voice piped, 'Miss Adair?'

A tiny woman, no taller than Maggie's shoulder, had suddenly materialised in front of her. She had grey hair, was wearing a bright fuchsia turtleneck with her glasses on a chain round her neck and, though obviously old, had eyes as bright as a little bird's.

'Mrs Beltan,' she said, indicating the portrait. 'Wonderful woman. Just wonderful.'

'She looks it,' said Maggie. 'Hello.'

'I'm Miss Prenderghast. School proctor. Follow me.'

Maggie wasn't sure what a proctor was but it sounded important. She followed carefully, as Miss Prenderghast's tiny heels clicked importantly on the spotless floor.

Veronica glanced up from the CV she was reading. Art, music, English . . . all useful. But, more importantly, Maggie Adair was from an inner-city comprehensive school. One with economic problems, social problems, academic problems – you name it. So many of the girls here were spoiled, only interested in getting into colleges with good social scenes and parties, en route to a good marriage and a house in the country . . . sometimes she wondered how much had changed in fifty years. A little exposure to the more difficult side of life might be just what they needed – provided they could understand the accent . . . she put on her warmest smile as Evelyn Prenderghast knocked on the door.

Oh, but the young people were so *scruffy* nowadays. That dreadful suit looked as if it had been used for lining a dog's basket. And would it be too much to ask an interviewee to drag a comb through her hair? Veronica was disappointed, and it showed.

Maggie felt the headmistress's gaze on her the second she entered the room. It was like a laser. She felt as if it was taking in everything about her and it made her feel about ten years old. You wouldn't be able to tell a lie to Dr Deveral, she'd see through you instantly. Why hadn't she bought a new suit for the interview? Why? Was her mascara on straight? Why did she waste time mooning at all those portraits? She knew she should have gone to the loos and fixed herself up.

'Hello,' she said, as confidently as she could manage, and suddenly decided to pretend to herself that this *was* her

school, that she already worked here, that this was her life. She gazed around at the headmistress's office, which was panelled in dark wood, with more portraits on the wall – including one of the queen – and a variety of different and beautiful objects, that looked as if they had been collected from around the world, set on different surfaces, carefully placed to catch the eye and look beautiful. Just imagine. Maggie looked at a lovely sculpture of the hunting goddess Diana with her dogs, and her face broke into a grin.

Veronica was quite taken aback by how much the girl's face changed when she smiled – it was a lovely, open smile that made her look nearly the same age as some of her students. Quite an improvement. But that suit . . .

Veronica was frustrated. This girl was very nice and everything – even the Glaswegian accent wasn't too strong, which was a relief. She hadn't been looking forward to an entire interview of asking the girl to repeat herself. But so far it had all been chat about college and so on – nothing useful at all. Nothing particularly worthwhile, just lots of the usual interview platitudes about bringing out children's strengths and independence of thought and whatever the latest buzzwords were out there. She sighed, then decided to ask one question she'd always wondered about.

'Miss Adair, tell me something . . . this school you work at. It has dreadfully poor exam results, doesn't it?'

'Yes,' said Maggie, hoping she wasn't being personally blamed for all of them. She could tell this interview wasn't going well – not at all, in fact – and was resigning herself to the long trip back, along with a fair bit of humble pie dished up by Stan in the Bear & Bees later.

Dr Deveral hadn't seemed in the least bit interested in her new language initiatives or her dissertation. Probably a bit

much to hope for, that someone from a lovely school like this would be interested in someone like her from a rough school. Suddenly the thought made her indignant – just because her kids weren't posh didn't mean they weren't all right, most of them. In fact, the ones that did do well were doing it against incredible odds, much harder than the pony-riding spoon-feeding they probably did here. She suddenly felt herself flush hot with indignation.

'Yes, it does have poor results. But they're improving all the—'

Veronica cut her off with a wave of the hand. 'What I wonder is, why do you make these children stay on at school? They don't want to go, they're not going to get any qualifications . . . I mean, really, what's the point?'

If anything was likely to make Maggie really furious it was this. Stan said it all the time. It just showed he had absolutely no idea, and neither did this stupid woman, who'd only ever sat in her posh study, drinking tea and wondering how many swimming pools to build next year. Bugger this stupid job. Stan had been right, it was a waste of her time. Some people would just never understand.

'I'll tell you the point,' said Maggie, her accent subconsciously getting stronger. 'School is all some of these children have got. School is the only order in their lives. They hate getting expelled, believe it or not. Their homes are chaotic and their families are chaotic, and any steadiness and guidance we can give them, any order and praise, and timekeeping and support, anything the school can give them at all, even just a hot meal once a day, that's what's worth it. So I suppose they don't get *quite* as many pupils into Oxford and Cambridge as you do, Dr Deveral. But I don't think they're automatically less valuable just because their parents can't pay.'

Maggie felt very hot suddenly, realising she'd been quite rude, and that an outburst hadn't exactly been called for, especially not one that sounded as if it was calling for a socialist revolution. 'So . . . erhm. I guess I'm probably best back there,' she finished weakly, in a quiet voice.

Veronica sat back and, for the first time that day, let a genuine smile cross her lips.

'Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that,' she said.

Simone held her arms out like a traffic warden's, feeling acutely self-conscious.

'We'll have to send away for these,' the three-hundred-year-old woman in the uniform shop had said, as all her fellow crones had nodded in agreement. 'Downey House! That's rather famous, isn't it?'

'Yes it is,' said her mother, self-importantly. Her mum was all dressed up, just to come to a uniform shop. She looked totally stupid, like she was on her way to a wedding or something. Why did her mother have to be so embarrassing all the time? 'And our Simone's going there!'

Well, obviously she was going there, seeing as she was in getting measured up for the uniform. Simone let out a sigh.

'Now she's quite big around the chest for her age,' said the woman loudly.

'Yes, she's going to be just like me,' said her mum, who was shaped like a barrel. 'Look – big titties.'

There was another mother in there – much more subtly dressed – with a girl around Simone's age, who was getting measured for a different school. As soon as they heard 'big titties', however, they glanced at each other. Simone wished the floor would open and swallow her up.

As the saleslady put the tape measure around her hips, Simone risked a glance out of the window. At exactly the

wrong time: Estelle Grant, the nastiest girl in year seven, was walking past with two of her cronies.

Immediately a look of glee spread over Estelle's face, as she pummelled her friends to look. Simone's mum and the lady were completely oblivious to her discomfort, standing up on a stool in full view of the high street.

'Can I get down?' she said desperately, as Estelle started posing with her chest out, as if struggling to contain her massive bosoms. It wasn't Simone's fault that she was so well developed. Now the other girls had puffed out their cheeks and were staggering around like elephants. Simone felt tears prick the back of her eyes. She wasn't going to cry, she *wasn't*. She was never going back to that school. Nobody would ever make her feel like Estelle Grant did, ever again.

'Now, your school requires a boater, so let's check for hat size,' the lady was saying, plonking a straw bonnet on her head. This was too much for the girls outside; they collapsed in half-fake hysterics.

Simone closed her eyes and dug her nails into her hands, as her mother twittered to the sales lady about how fast her daughter was growing up – and out! And she got her periods at ten, can you imagine?! The saleslady shook her head in amazement through a mouthful of pins, till Estelle and her cronies finally tired of the sport and, in an orgy of rude hand signals, went on their way.

Never again. Never again.