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Opening Extract from...

West End Girls

Written by Barbara Tate

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West End Girls

The real lives, loves and friendships
of 1940s Soho and its working girls



BARBARA TATE



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One



My affair with Soho started at seven thirty one winter's morning, just as I was about to have breakfast: an odd time for a romance to begin, but that is how it was. I was seventeen years old.

My youngest uncle – then about twenty-five and trying hard to be a man-about-town – had recently bought his first made-to-measure suit. This seemed to have automatically invested him with the knowledge of which wine should be drunk with what and a desire for foreign travel, all of which I found very impressive. He came down to breakfast on that particular morning and announced with an air of self-conscious nonchalance that on the previous evening he had dined 'at a rather interesting little restaurant in Soho'.

My grandmother, who was frying eggs at the time, swung round in horror – fish slice poised and dripping fat all over the quarry-tiled floor. Her face was a picture of outraged shock.

'Henry!' she bellowed.

I gazed from one to the other, fascinated. My first thought was a selfish one: perhaps the interruption might result in a well-cooked egg instead of the usual 'healthily' raw one my grandmother always insisted on dishing up. My overriding amazement, though, was caused by the fact

that Henry – her favourite child, who usually managed to get away with all sorts of minor wrongdoings – was about to be scolded.

'Henry!' she bellowed again.

She fixed him with the gaze that all of us – including my grandfather – dreaded. Storm clouds first, and now the thunder.

'How dare you go to such a place! Soho indeed. I haven't brought you up to be a gentleman for you to start leading that sort of life. Anything could happen to you in a place like that. Don't let me hear that you've gone there again, and don't ever mention it again—especially in front of her!'

She jerked her head and flapped the fish slice in my direction. Then she hurled an egg on to each of our plates and marched out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind her. An inveterate door-slammer at such times, my grandmother always liked the whole household and half the street to know when she was angry. My uncle, now humbled and looking sheepish, ate his egg in silence. So did I, speculating all the time about Soho.

I should perhaps explain why it was that it had been left to my grandmother to defend me from wickedness. I was born in Uxbridge, west London. My father was a lorry-driver and a carpenter. I remember once lying curled up on the floor of his workshop, falling asleep among the golden wood-curls and the smell of pine. I remember too a journey in the cab of his lorry, with him saying delightedly, 'Sheep hearts for supper tonight, Babs. Imagine!' Most of my early memories, however, are not so happy. My father was a violent man, apt to vent his rages on whoever walked into his path, including on occasion me.

I recall one incident, when I must have done something to enrage him. He carried me up to an upstairs window,

strung a little noose of wire round my neck, and attached the other end to the top of the casement. I had to stand on tiptoe, because if I did not, the wire tightened round my throat and began to choke me. I don't know exactly how long I was there, but it must have been some hours, because I recall the muffin man walking up and down the street with a basket of bread on his head, clanging his bell as he went. Then, much later, the street traders gave way to the lamplighter, making his way up the street, lighting the gas lamps as he went. Night had properly fallen before my mother found me and rescued me. I was three years old at the time.

The rescue didn't last for long. One day when I was about three and a half, my father announced to my mother and me that if we were still in the house when he arrived back from work, he would kill us both. We had reason to believe him, since he owned a gun and had once fired it into a bedroom door during one of his outbursts. We packed hurriedly and left the same day to stay with friends. Not long afterwards, my mother announced that I would have to stay with my grandmother for a day, because she needed to go off to Bristol for some reason.

Even as a little girl, I did not like my grandmother. Florence was a forbidding woman who ruled her household with steely determination and rarely a smile. Her family were all terrified of her and for a toddler, having to spend the day with her was not an attractive prospect. My mother, Doris, handed me over and left, promising to be back to collect me before nightfall.

Later that evening, my grandmother made up a bed for me out of two chairs pulled together.

'But I can't go to bed,' I protested. 'Mummy's coming back for me.'

'Oh, she can collect you in the morning,' Grandmother

told me, and I climbed obediently into the makeshift bed.

It was in fact more than five years later that I next saw – or rather, almost saw – my mother. I was eight or nine years old. I was in disgrace for some reason and had been sent to the corner. I was sitting alone, facing the wall, feeling sorry for myself, when there was a knock at the door. My grandmother went to answer it, and I heard her say, 'Why, Doris, fancy seeing you here.' As she walked back in she added, 'But don't speak to Babs; she's been naughty.' Sure enough, my mother ignored me and left again soon after without a word.

My grandmother's was a household ruled by the iron phrase 'What would people think?' – that, and an overriding fear of vulgarity. On 8 May 1945, VE day, the day when six long years of war in Europe finally ended and families up and down the country tumbled out on to the streets to cheer, and flirt, and eat, my grandmother refused to alter her routine a single iota. We weren't allowed outside, and in our house at least, Hitler's fall went completely uncelebrated.

My mother's distance towards me might perhaps be explained by her own experience of childhood, but I had also been born out of wedlock, and it had been her unwanted pregnancy that had forced her into what was seen as an inferior marriage to a violent and unstable man. She would remarry again in due course and have two further daughters. When they got married in a double ceremony years later, my mother turned to me and complained how hard it was 'to lose both my daughters on the same day'.

This, however, is to lose my thread. In my grandmother's house, I was a sucker for anything that suggested a spirit of love, beauty or community – in fact, almost anything

that seemed to promise a life different from the one I knew. The conversation I had just heard over breakfast seemed to offer a clue to where such a life might be found.

I had read about exotic places like Marseille and the Casbah and gathered from my grandmother's reaction that Soho belonged to the same, notorious group. But whereas Marseille and the Casbah seemed to be on another planet entirely, in relation to the small suburb of Southall where we lived, Soho was apparently within easy reach – at least for my uncle Henry. I longed to ask him about it, but my grandmother's word was law and she had said it must not be mentioned. I was never allowed to speak unless spoken to first, but I was determined to find out what this Soho was all about.

In spite of my lack of any real communication with anyone in the house, Uncle Henry – although taciturn almost to the point of neurosis – was my idol. He was completely different from the rest of the family. I would note the books he brought home from the library and, as soon as possible, read them myself. They were mostly philosophy and the classics, and at seventeen, I struggled hopelessly with Nietzsche and Jung. His other interests were equally challenging to my young self: symphony concerts, opera and the arts. I tried to understand all these things, at first to gain his approval but then, gradually, for the joy I found in them for their own sake. Of all these, it was painting that really captivated me, and I even seemed to have some aptitude for it. A couple of years earlier, encouraged by an art teacher at my school, I'd managed to win a scholarship to Ealing Art School, a few miles away on the west London fringe. Financially, it would have been impossible for me to take the offer up were it not for all sorts of grants made available to me to cover everything – right down to clothing and school meals.

On the morning of Uncle Henry's revelation, I had about another year of my scholarship to run. All day Soho was uppermost in my mind, and between lessons I managed to find out more from my more worldly fellow pupils. Yes, Soho was in London, and no, nice people didn't go there. Someone even showed me its location on a map. Satisfied at last, I filed away all this knowledge for further reference and applied myself to schoolwork once more.

When I was nearly eighteen, the headmaster sent for me and asked what my plans were. I told him I must somehow find a job. He seemed upset: he felt I should stay on long enough to get a teaching diploma. He even suggested it might help if he had a talk with my grandmother.

'I would be able to explain to her,' he said, 'that there are various further grants available to students who I feel are sufficiently promising – private grants, you understand,' he added confidentially.

If there has been one burning, all-pervading ambition in my life that has never varied, never flagged, it is that before I die, I will paint the perfect picture. I was tempted by his offer, but I had the pride and longing for independence of those who have very little else. It was a difficult decision for me to make, but that pride won in the end.

'You have been very kind,' I said. 'I'm more than grateful, but the thought of accepting any more charity makes me feel quite ill. I can't do it.'

He was an understanding man; he realised how I felt and that was that.

And so, during my nineteenth year, I left art school. It had taught me so much. I knew the shape and disposition of every bone, muscle and vein of *Homo sapiens* and most other animals; I knew perspective in all its forms; I knew historic architecture; I was conversant with the lives and

works of the great artists and their techniques. But the war had just ended and I realised that, with continuing austerity, the last thing England needed at that moment was an aspiring artist with no knowledge of the world.

So, predictably, my first job had little to do with art. It was in the darkroom of a photographic firm, and I found the work repetitive and lonely. I tried again: this time at the National Film Library, which was, again, not for me. Then – about a year after the war had ended – people began to want pretty things around them once more. I took the opportunity to improve my lot, and found a job in a studio that had just started painting flowers, birds and such things on lampshades and other articles. They had begun in a very small way and I think I was only their second employee. It was still certainly a very far cry from my dreams of becoming a great painter, but using a brush for eight hours every day made it become almost a part of my body and taught me a dexterity and fluidity whose value I have since come to recognise.

So far, nothing had diminished the fascination Soho held for me. I had even contrived for all my jobs to be nearby, and I snatched every chance to get closer. Most of my wages went to my grandmother, so as a necessary economy, I always took sandwiches for lunch. This proved to be a happy arrangement, for it gave me plenty of time during my lunch hour to explore Soho's perimeter. This delighted me, and the temptation to delve into Soho itself grew. Still, I did not dare to actually do so, as my grandmother seemed to have an uncanny ability to know everything I did – a sort of third eye that hovered over me wherever I went.

I knew Soho's border formed a rectangle and that walking right round it, you covered about two miles. On the northern edge was Oxford Street, on the west, Regent Street; the southern side consisted of Piccadilly Circus,

Coventry Street, Leicester Square and Cranbourn Street and the eastern boundary was formed by the Charing Cross Road.

For me, the wonders of this two-mile circuit never palled. Oxford Street, with its glamorous department stores on one side, and on the other, the small but still glamorous shops that backed on to Soho itself. These were mainly ground-floor shops with the upper floors occupied by a miscellany of small firms, and the entranceways were dotted with a profusion of interesting name boards. As well as the usual solicitors, architects and import agents, there were entertainment and detective agencies, and more bizarre professions like 'Madam Zaz – Palmist', and a few doors further along, 'Mustapha ben Ali – Astrologer' or 'Offenbach – Trance Medium'. These were usually high up in the buildings, where rents were cheaper.

Along the grandly curving Regent Street, the shops became more expensive and precious, and I found it hard to believe that anyone was rich enough to buy things there. On reaching Piccadilly Circus, I'd pause at the statue of Eros, newly freed from its wartime wrappings, surrounded by people sitting gazing at the milling life around them. It is said that if you sit near Eros long enough, everyone you've ever known will eventually pass by.

Not keen to be reunited with anyone from my past, I'd head on to Coventry Street, which in those days held the most amazing Lyons Corner House. It consisted of floor upon floor of different restaurants, and I feel sad for people who are too young to have known it. Despite its magnificent interior and service, it was not at all expensive to eat there. On the ground floor was a huge patisserie-cum-delicatessen-cum-everything. There was a vast array of edible things to buy and take away in boxes tied with coloured braid. Opening off this were the many tearooms

and snack bars, each with their own distinctive decor. On the floors above were all sorts of restaurants catering for different pockets and tastes. The Salad Bowl on the top floor was my particular joy when I could afford it. Here, it was self-service, with counters filled with rows and rows and rows of containers brimming with every kind of salad the mind could dream up. There were great baskets full of crispy rolls, piles of butter, and tables groaning with enormous shivering jellies, trifles, blancmanges and tremendous squashy gateaux. For the sum of two-and-sixpence you could eat your fill. Oh, a truly wonderful place! But Mr Lyons, in his wisdom, had foreseen that certain people might have limitless time to do this. So at intervals during the day, this department was emptied of customers and closed.

Slightly further along, and opening out from Coventry Street, was the fabulous Leicester Square, surrounded by all the great cinemas – the Ritz, Empire, Warner, Odeon and Leicester Square theatres, where premieres were regularly held. The great stars arrived in limousines while the excited, surging crowds were restrained by lines of policemen. In those days, television sets were still incredibly rare, and so the cinema was the land of dreams and its stars were held in near-godlike regard.

Outside these cinemas on ordinary days there were always long queues of people waiting to go in, and it was, I should think, about the most lucrative place in London for buskers. Musicians, escapologists and all sorts of novelty acts performed in the middle of the busy road, and the traffic had to skirt them carefully. In the midst of all this was the central square, like an oasis, full of trees. When dusk fell, starlings from all over London came to roost.

At the junction with Charing Cross Road, opposite Wyndham's Theatre, Soho's final boundary was reached,

and this road was a real delight to me. There were bookshops on either side, nearly all of them with trestle tables outside stacked with second-hand books, and you had to almost fight for a place to look at them. In those days, the greatest of these were Zwemmer's and Foyles. The latter also had the most enormous second-hand department inside – almost a whole floor. It was here that I most loved to browse whilst surreptitiously eating my sandwiches.

Shaftesbury Avenue cut this stretch of the road at Cambridge Circus, which was alive with its flotilla of fruit and shellfish stalls and hot chestnut braziers. Further along were the Tatler News Theatre, the Phoenix Theatre and the Astoria Cinema and Ballroom – always emblazoned with colourful hand-painted posters. The busy St Giles' Circus at the top of Charing Cross Road marked my reunion with Oxford Street and my wandering would be over for another day.

Those lunch hours were the happiest part of my day, but I worked hard at my painting job, getting little pay rises here and there, though these left me no better off, as they always went straight to my grandmother. Not that that mattered to me very much, as I'd never had the opportunity to develop a desire for clothes or cosmetics (I was not allowed to wear make-up of any kind – even face powder – and my face had that permanent shine that I'm sure only Sunlight soap can give), though I would have liked to have bought some paints.

The next two years passed slowly. I was given more and more responsibility at work and gained a slight degree of self-assurance. My life at home, though, had become increasingly impossible and my grandmother more and more demanding. She had reached the conclusion that the only way in which I could repay all her charity was by

becoming her support in her old age. Had she been a kind, loving person, I would have naturally and willingly fallen into that role; but as it was, I felt nervous and caged. I was only allowed out one evening a week – Friday – on the express understanding that I went to the pictures and nowhere else.

So it was that the day after I reached the longed-for age of twenty-one – the day I legally became an adult – I made all my possessions up into two parcels and, with my grandmother's curses following me, left her house, completely alone in the world.