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Eighty Days Yellow

Written by Vina Jackson

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Eighty Days Yellow

Vina Jackson



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A Girl and Her Violin

I blame it on Vivaldi.

More specifically, on my CD of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, which now sat face down on the bedside cabinet, alongside the body of my softly snoring boyfriend.

We'd had a fight when Darren had arrived home at 3 a.m. following a business trip and found me lying on the wooden floor in his living room, nude, the concerto playing as loudly as his surround-sound system would allow. Loud.

The *presto* movement of 'Summer', the Concerto No. 2 in G minor, was just about to kick into full swing when Darren flung open the door.

I hadn't noticed that he'd returned until I felt the flat of his shoe resting on my right shoulder and shaking me back and forth. I opened my eyes and saw him leaning over me. I then noticed that he'd turned the lights on and the CD had come to a sudden halt.

'What the fuck are you doing?' he said.

'Listening to music,' I replied in my smallest voice.

'I can hear that! I could hear it all the way down the street!' he yelled.

He'd been away in Los Angeles, and looked remarkably fresh for someone who had just got off a long flight. He was still wearing half of his business suit, a crisp white

shirt, leather belt and dark-navy trousers with a very thin pinstripe, the matching jacket slung over one arm. He was gripping the handle of his wheelie case tightly. It had evidently been raining outside, though I hadn't heard a thing over the sound of the music. His case was slick with rain, rivulets running down the side and pooling onto the floor alongside my thigh. The bottoms of his trousers were wet where his umbrella had not been able to shield him, and were stuck to his calves.

I turned my head towards his shoe and saw an inch of damp calf. He smelled musky, part sweat, part rain, part shoe polish and leather. A few drips of moisture fell from his shoe and onto my arm.

Vivaldi always had a very particular effect on me, and neither the early morning hour nor the look of irritation on Darren's face did anything to distract me from the feeling of warmth that spread rapidly through my body, lighting the blood in my veins in much the same way that the music had.

I turned so that his shoe was still pressed lightly to my right arm and I ran my left hand up his trouser leg.

He stepped backwards, immediately, as if I'd burned him, and shook his head.

'Jesus Christ, Summer . . .'

He wheeled the case up against the wall next to the CD rack, removed *The Four Seasons* from the player and then walked to his room. I considered getting up and following him, but decided against it. There was no way that I could win an argument with Darren when I didn't have any clothes on. I hoped that if I just continued to lie still, I could defuse his rage by appearing less visible, hopeful that my unclothed body would blend better into his wooden

flooring if I was lying horizontally rather than standing upright.

I heard the sound of the wardrobe door open and the familiar rattling of wooden coat hangers as he hung up his jacket. In the six months that we had been dating, I hadn't once seen him throw his coat over a chair or the back of the couch, like a normal person would. He hung his jacket straight into the wardrobe, then sat down to take off his shoes, then removed his cufflinks, then unbuttoned his shirt and put it straight into the washing basket, then took off his belt and hung it over the wardrobe rail alongside half a dozen others in varying sombre shades of navy, black and brown. He wore designer briefs, the style I like best on men, tiny pairs of stretch-cotton shorts with a thick waistband. I loved the way that the briefs hugged him, tantalisingly tight, although to my eternal disappointment he would always cover himself with a robe and never walked through the flat with just his underwear on. Nakedness offended Darren.

We'd met at a recital in the summer. It was a big deal for me; one of the scheduled violinists had called in sick and I had been drafted in at the last minute to play in the orchestra, a piece by Arvo Pärt, which I hated. I found it jerky and monotonous, but for a classical slot on a real stage, albeit a small stage, I would have played Justin Bieber and found a way to look as though I was enjoying myself. Darren had been in the audience and he'd loved it. He had a thing for redheads, and he said later that he couldn't see my face because of the angle of the stage, but he had a great view of the top of my head. He said my hair had shone in

the stage light as though I was on fire. He'd bought a bucket of champagne and had used his connections with the concert organisers to find me backstage.

I don't like champagne, but I drank it anyway, because he was tall and attractive and the closest thing I'd ever had to a bona fide groupie.

I asked him what he'd have done if I'd been missing my front teeth or had been, in some other way, not to his taste, and he replied that he'd have tried his luck with the percussionist, who wasn't a redhead but was still fairly attractive.

A few hours later, I was drunk and flat on my back in his room in Ealing, wondering how I ended up in bed with a man who stopped to hang up his jacket and lay his shoes carefully together before he climbed on top of me. However, he had a big cock and a nice apartment, and although it turned out that he hated all the music I loved, we spent most of our weekends over the following months together. Unfortunately, to my mind, not nearly enough of that time was spent in bed, and far too much of it was spent going to see highbrow art affairs that I didn't enjoy and was convinced Darren didn't understand.

Men who saw me play in proper classical music venues instead of pubs and tube stations seemed to make the same mistake that Darren had, believing that I would possess all of the traits they associated with a female classical violinist. I would be well mannered, proper, cultured, educated, ladylike and graceful, in possession of a wardrobe full of simple and stylish gowns for wearing on stage, none of them vulgar or showing too much flesh. I would wear kitten heels and be unaware of the effect that my slim ankles might arouse.

In fact, I had only one long, formal black dress for concerts, which I'd bought for a tenner from a shop in Brick Lane and had altered by a tailor. It was velvet with a high neck and a low back, but had been at the dry cleaner's the night I met Darren, so I had bought a bandage dress from Selfridges on my credit card and tucked the tags into my underwear. Fortunately, Darren was a tidy lover and had left no stains either on me or the dress, so I was able to return it the next day.

I had my own place, where I spent my weeknights, part of a block of flats in Whitechapel. It was a bedsit, more of a room than an apartment, with a moderately large single bed, a standing rail that functioned as a wardrobe and a small sink, fridge and cooker. The bathroom was down the hall, shared with four others, whom I did bump into occasionally, but generally they kept to themselves.

Despite the location and the run-down building, I could never have afforded the rent had I not struck a deal with the leaseholder, whom I met in a bar one night after a late-night visit to the British Museum. He never fully explained why he wanted to rent the room out for less than he was paying for it, but I presumed that beneath the floorboards lay either a body or a cache of white powder and I often lay awake at night expecting to hear the stampeding footsteps of a SWAT team running up the hall.

Darren had never been to my flat, partly because I had a feeling that he couldn't have brought himself to set foot on the premises without having the whole building steam-cleaned, and partly because I liked to have a portion of my life that belonged entirely to me. I suppose deep down I knew that our relationship was unlikely to last, and I didn't

want to have to deal with a jilted lover throwing rocks at my window in the night.

He had suggested, more than once, that I move in with him and save the money that I was spending on rent so that I could put it towards a nicer violin, or more lessons, but I refused. I hate living with other people, particularly lovers, and I'd rather make money moonlighting on a street corner than be supported by a boyfriend.

I heard the soft snap of his cufflink box closing, shut my eyes and squeezed my legs together in an attempt to make myself invisible.

He stepped back into the living room and walked straight past me into the kitchen. I heard the rush of the kitchen tap, the soft hiss of the gas lighting and, a few minutes later, the rumble of the kettle. He had one of those modern but old-fashioned-style kettles that needs to be heated on the stove until it whistles. I couldn't understand why he didn't just get an electric one, but he claimed that the water tasted better, and that a proper cup of tea should be made with a proper pot of water. I don't drink tea. Even the smell of it makes me ill. I drink coffee, but Darren refused to make me coffee after 7 p.m. as it kept me awake, and he said that my restless nocturnal fidgeting kept him awake too.

I relaxed into the floor and pretended that I was somewhere else, slowing my breathing in a concentrated effort to stay perfectly still, like a corpse.

'I just can't speak to you when you're like this, Summer.' His voice floated from the kitchen, disembodied. It was one of my favourite things about him, the rich tone of his public-schoolboy accent, at turns soft and warm, and at

other times cold and hard. I felt a rush of warmth between my thighs and locked my legs together as tightly as I could, thinking of how Darren had laid a towel down the one and only time we'd had sex on the living-room floor. He hated mess.

'Like what?' I replied, without opening my eyes.

'Like this! Naked and stretched out on the floor like a lunatic! Get up and put some fucking clothes on.'

He drained the last mouthfuls of his tea, and hearing the sound of his gentle gulps, I imagined how it would feel to have him kneel with his mouth between my legs. The thought made me flush.

Darren didn't normally go down on me unless I wasn't more than five minutes out of the shower, and even then his licks were tentative, and his tongue replaced by his finger at the earliest possible polite opportunity. He preferred to use only one finger and had not responded well when I had reached my hand down and tried to guide two more inside me.

'Jesus, Summer,' he'd said, 'you'll be gaping by the time you're thirty if you carry on like that.'

He'd gone into the kitchen and washed his hands with dishwashing liquid before coming back to bed and rolling over, falling asleep with his back to me while I lay awake and stared at the ceiling. From the vigorous sounds of splashing, it seemed that he'd washed all the way up to his elbows, like a veterinary nurse about to birth a calf, or a priest about to make a sacrifice.

I hadn't ever encouraged him to try more than one finger again.

Darren put his cup in the sink and walked past me to the bedroom. I waited a few moments after he had disappeared

from sight before getting up, embarrassed at the thought of how obscene I would look to him as I rose nude from the floor, although I'd now fallen thoroughly out of my Vivaldi-induced reverie and my limbs were beginning to ache and chill.

'Come to bed, then, when you're ready,' he called back behind him.

I listened to him undress and get into bed, pulled my underwear on and waited for his breathing to deepen before slipping between the sheets beside him.

I was four years old the first time I heard Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. My mother and siblings had gone away for the weekend to visit my grandmother. I had refused to leave without my father, who couldn't come because he had to work. I clung to him and bawled as my parents tried to bundle me into the car, until eventually they relented and let me stay behind.

My father let me skip nursery school and took me to work with him instead. I spent three glorious days of almost total freedom racing around his workshop, climbing stacks of tyres and inhaling deep rubber-scented breaths as I watched him jack up other people's cars and slide beneath them so that just his waist and legs were visible. I always stayed close by, as I had a terrible fear that one day the jack would fail and the car would drop and cleave him in two. I don't know if it was arrogance or foolishness, but even at that age I thought I would be able to save him, that given the right amount of adrenaline, I would be able to hold up the body of a car for the few seconds that it would take him to escape.

After he'd finished working, we'd climb into his truck

and take the long way home, stopping for an ice cream in a cone on the way, even though I wasn't usually allowed to eat dessert before dinner. My father always ordered rum and raisin, while I asked for a different flavour every time, or sometimes half a scoop of two different sorts.

Late one night, I'd been unable to sleep and had wandered into the living room and found him lying on his back in the dark, apparently asleep, though not breathing heavily. He'd brought his record player in from the garage and I could hear the soft swish of the needle with each turn of the record.

'Hello, daughter,' he said.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'Listening to music,' he replied, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

I lay down alongside him so I could feel the warmth of his body near me and the faint smell of new rubber mixed with heavy-duty hand cleaner. I closed my eyes and lay still, until soon the floor disappeared and the only thing that existed in the world was me, suspended in the dark, and the sound of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* on the hi-fi.

Thereafter, I asked my father to play the record again and again, perhaps because I believed that I had been named after one of the movements, a theory that my parents never confirmed.

My early enthusiasm was such that for my birthday that year my father bought me a violin and arranged for me to have lessons. I had always been a fairly impatient child, and independent, the sort of person who might not seem predisposed to taking extra lessons or to learning music, but I dearly wanted, more than anything in the world, to play something that would make me fly away, like I had that

night I'd first heard Vivaldi. So from the instant that I set my tiny hands on the bow and the instrument, I practised every waking moment.

My mother began to worry that I was becoming obsessive, and wanted to take the violin away from me for a time, so that I could pay more attention to the rest of my schoolwork, and perhaps also make some friends, but I had flat refused to relinquish my instrument. With a bow in my hand, I felt as though I might take flight at any moment. Without it, I was nothing, just a body like any other body, welded to the ground like a stone.

I quickly worked through the levels of my music primers, and by the time I was nine years old, I was playing far beyond the capacity my astounded school music teacher could conceive.

My father organised more lessons for me, with an older Dutch gentleman, Hendrik van der Vliet, who lived two streets away from us and rarely left his house. He was a tall, painfully thin man who moved awkwardly, as if he were attached to strings, and as if the substance he moved through was thicker than air, like a grasshopper swimming through honey. When he picked up his violin, his body became liquid. Watching the movements of his arm was like watching waves rise and fall in the sea. Music flowed in and out of him like a tide.

Unlike Mrs Drummond, the school music teacher, who had been shocked and suspicious of my progress, Mr van der Vliet seemed largely unmoved. He rarely spoke and never smiled. Though the population of my town, Te Aroha, was small, few people knew him and, as far as I was aware, he did not have any other students. My father told me that he had once played in the Royal Concertgebouw

Orchestra in Amsterdam under Bernard Haitink and had left his classical career and moved to New Zealand when he met a Kiwi woman at one of his concerts. She had died in a car accident on the day that I was born.

Like Hendrik, my father was a quiet man, but interested in people, and he knew everyone in Te Aroha. At some point or other, even the most reclusive person would fall victim to a flat tyre, whether attached to a car, a motorbike or a lawnmower, and with a reputation for taking on even the smallest repair job, my father's time was often consumed with doing odd jobs for various locals, including Hendrik, who had come into his workshop one day to have a bicycle tyre repaired and had left with a violin student.

I felt an odd sort of loyalty towards Mr van der Vliet, as if I was responsible in some way for his happiness, having come into the world on the same day that his wife left it. I felt bound to please him, and under his tutelage I practised and practised until my arms ached and the tips of my fingers were raw.

At school, I was neither popular nor an outcast. My grades were consistently average, and I was unremarkable in every way, other than in music, where my extra lessons and aptitude put me far ahead of my peers. Mrs Drummond ignored me in lessons, perhaps fearing that my extra expertise would make my classmates feel jealous or inadequate.

Every night I went into our garage and played the violin, or listened to records, usually in the dark, mentally swimming across the classical canon. Sometimes my father would join me. We rarely spoke to each other, but I always felt connected to him through the shared experience of listening, or perhaps by our mutual oddity.

I avoided parties and didn't socialise much. Consequently, sexual experiences with boys my own age were limited. Even before I grew into my teens, however, I felt a quickening inside that signalled the early onset of what would later become a hearty sexual appetite. Playing a violin seemed to heighten my senses. It was as if distractions were drowned in the sound and everything else disappeared into the periphery of my perception other than the sensations of my body. As I entered my teens, I began to associate this feeling with arousal. I wondered why I was so easily turned on, and why music had such a powerful effect on me. I always worried that my sex drive was abnormally high.

Mr van der Vliet treated me as if I were an instrument rather than a person. He moved my arms into position or laid a hand on my back to straighten my spine as if I were made of wood not flesh. He seemed completely unconscious of his touch, as though I were an extension of his own body. He was never anything other than completely chaste, but despite that, and his age and slightly acrid smell and bony face, I began to feel something for him. He was unusually tall, taller than my father, perhaps about six foot six, and he towered over me. Even grown to full height, I was only five five. At thirteen years of age, my head barely reached his chest.

I began to look forward to our lessons together for reasons beyond the pleasure of perfecting my own playing. Occasionally I affected an ill-considered note or an awkward movement of my wrist in the hope that he would touch my hand to correct me.

'Summer,' he said to me softly one day, 'if you continue to do that, I will teach you no longer.'

I never played a bum note again.

Until that night, a few hours before Darren and I fought over *The Four Seasons*.

I'd been at a bar in Camden Town, playing a free set with a minor would-be blues rock group, when suddenly my fingers had frozen and I'd missed a note. None of the band members had noticed, and aside from a few hard-core fans who were there for Chris, the lead singer and guitarist, most of the audience was ignoring us. It was a Wednesday-night gig, and the midweek crowd was even tougher than the Saturday-night drunks, as aside from the die-hard fans, the punters were just at the bar for a quiet beer and a chat, inattentive to the music. Chris had told me not to worry about it.

He played viola as well as guitar, though he had largely given up the first instrument in an attempt to create a more commercial appeal with the second. We were both string musicians at heart and had developed a bit of a bond because of it.

'It happens to all of us, sweetheart,' he'd said.

But it didn't happen to me. I was mortified.

I'd left the band without having a drink with them afterwards and caught the train to Darren's flat in Ealing, letting myself in with the spare key. I had mixed his flight times up, thinking he'd arrive later in the morning having taken the red eye and gone straight to the office without dropping by home first, giving me a chance to sleep in a comfortable bed the whole night and listen to some tunes. Another of my reasons for continuing to date him was the quality of the sound system in his flat, and because he had

enough floor space to lie on. He was one of the few people I knew who still had a proper stereo, including a CD player, and there wasn't enough space in my flat to lie on the floor, unless I put my head in the kitchen cupboard.

After a few hours of Vivaldi on repeat, I concluded that this relationship, while mostly pleasant, was strangling my creative drive. Six months of moderate art, moderate music, moderate barbecues with other moderate couples and moderate lovemaking had left me pulling at the chain I'd allowed to grow round my own neck, a noose of my own making.

I had to find a way out of it.

Darren was usually a light sleeper, but he regularly took Nytol to help him avoid jet lag after his flights back from Los Angeles. I could see the packet glinting in his otherwise empty wastepaper basket. Even at 4 a.m. he had dutifully disposed of the rubbish rather than let an empty wrapper rest on his bedside cabinet until morning.

The Vivaldi CD sat face down next to his lamp. For Darren, leaving a CD out of the case was the ultimate expression of protest. Despite the Nytol, I was surprised he'd been able to sleep at all, with it lying beside him, getting scratched.

I slipped out of bed before dawn, having had one or two hours of sleep at best, and left him a note on the kitchen bench. 'Sorry,' I said, 'for the noise. Sleep well. I'll call you, etc.'

I took the Central line tube into the West End with no real idea of which direction I was headed. My flat was permanently messy, and I didn't like to practise there too

often as the walls were thin and I worried that the tenants in the rooms next door would eventually tire of the noise, pleasant though I hoped it was. My arms ached to play, if for no other reason than to wear out the emotions that had built up over the previous night.

The tube was packed by the time I'd reached Shepherd's Bush. I'd chosen to stand at the end of the carriage, leaning against one of the cushioned seats by the door as it was easier than sitting with my violin case between my legs. Now I was crushed in a throng of sweaty office workers, more cramming in at each stop, each face more miserable than the last.

I was still wearing my long, black velvet dress from the gig the night before, along with a pair of cherry-red patent leather Dr Martens. I played in heels for classical gigs, but preferred to wear the boots home as I felt they added a threatening swagger to my walk as I made my way through East London late at night. I stood straight, with my chin high, imagining that, dressed as I was, most of the carriage, or at least those who could see me among the crowd, suspected I was on my way home from a one-night stand.

Fuck them. I wished I had been on my way home from a one-night stand. With Darren travelling so much and me playing as many gigs as I could get, we hadn't had sex in nearly a month. When we did, I rarely came, and only as the result of a hurried, embarrassed shuffling, me desperately trying to reach orgasm while worrying that my self-pleasuring after sex would make him feel inadequate. I still did it, even though I suspected that it did make him feel inadequate, because it was that or spend the next twenty-four hours pent up and miserable.

A construction worker got on at Marble Arch. By now

the end of the carriage was completely rammed, and the other passengers scowled as he tried to squeeze into a small gap by the door in front of me. He was tall, with thick, muscled limbs, and he had to crouch a little so that the doors could shut behind him.

'Move down, please,' a passenger called out in a polite, though strained, voice.

Nobody moved.

Ever well mannered, I shifted my violin case to create a space, leaving my body unencumbered and directly facing the muscled man.

The train set off with a start, throwing the passengers off balance. He jolted forward and I straightened my back to keep myself steady. For a moment I felt his torso squeeze against me. He was wearing a long-sleeved cotton shirt, a safety vest and stone-washed denim jeans. He wasn't fat, but he was stocky, like a rugby player in the off-season, and crunched up in the carriage with his arm stretched out to hold the overhead rail, everything he was wearing looked slightly too small for him.

I closed my eyes and imagined what he might look like beneath his jeans. I hadn't had a chance to check below the belt as he'd got on, but the hand holding the rail overhead was large and thick, so I figured that the same was true of the bulge in his denims.

We pulled into Bond Street station and a petite blonde, her face fixed with grim determination, prepared to wedge herself in.

Fleeting thought – would the train jerk again as it left the station?

It did.

Muscle Man stumbled against me, and feeling daring, I

squeezed my thighs together and felt his body stiffen. The blonde began to spread herself out a bit, poking the construction worker in the back with her elbow as she reached into her hefty handbag for a book. He shuffled closer to me to give her more room, or perhaps he was simply enjoying the nearness of our bodies.

I squeezed my thighs harder.

The train jolted again.

He relaxed.

Now his body was pressed firmly against mine, and emboldened by our seemingly coincidental proximity, I leaned back just a fraction, pushing my pelvis off the seat so that the button on his jeans pressed against the inside of my leg.

He moved his hand from the rail overhead to rest on the wall just above my shoulder so that we were nearly embracing. I imagined I heard his breath catch in his throat and his heart quicken, though any noise he might have made was drowned by the sound of the train rushing through the tunnel.

My heart was racing and I felt a sudden twinge of fear, thinking that I had gone too far. What would I do if he spoke to me? Or kissed me? I wondered how his tongue would feel in my mouth, if he was a good kisser, if he was the kind of man who would flick his tongue in and out horribly, like a lizard, or if he was the sort who would pull my hair back and kiss me slowly, like he meant it.

I felt a hot dampness spreading between my legs and realised with a mixture of embarrassment and pleasure that my underwear was wet. I was relieved that I had resisted my defiant urge to go commando that morning and instead found a spare pair of knickers at Darren's to put on.

Muscle Man was turning his face towards me now, trying to catch my gaze, and I kept my eyes lowered and my face straight, as if the press of his body against mine was nothing untoward and this was the way that I always travelled on my daily commute.

Fearing what might happen if I stood trapped between the carriage wall and this man any longer, I ducked under his arm and got off the train at Chancery Lane without looking back. I wondered, briefly, if he might follow me. I was wearing a dress; Chancery Lane was a quiet station; after our exchange on the train, he might suggest all manner of anonymous dirty deeds. But the train was gone and my muscled man with it.

I had meant to turn left out of the station and head to the French restaurant on the corner that made the best eggs Benedict I'd had since I left New Zealand. The first time I ate there, I told the chef that he made the most delicious breakfast in London, and he had replied, 'I know.' I can understand why the British don't like the French – they're a cocky bunch, but I like that about them, and I went back to the same restaurant for eggs Benedict as often as I could.

Now, though, too flustered to remember the way, instead of turning left I turned right. The French place didn't open until nine anyway. I could find a quiet spot in Grey's Inn Gardens, perhaps play a little before heading back to the restaurant.

Halfway down the street, searching for the unsignposted lane that led to the gardens, I realised that I was standing outside a strip club that I had visited only a few weeks after I first arrived in the UK. I had visited the club with a friend, a girl with whom I had worked briefly while travelling through Australia's Northern Territory and bumped

into again at a youth hostel nearby on my first night in London. She'd heard that dancing was the easiest way to make money here. You spent a couple of months or so at the sleazier joints and then you could get a job at one of the posh bars in Mayfair where celebrities and footballers would stuff wads of fake money down your G-string as if it were confetti.

Charlotte had taken me along to check the place out and see if she could pick up some work. To my disappointment, the man who had met us at the red-carpeted reception area didn't lead us into a room full of scantily clad ladies getting their groove on, but instead took us into his office, through another door off to the side.

He asked Charlotte to outline her previous experience – of which she had none, unless you counted dancing on tables at nightclubs. Next he looked her up and down in the way that a jockey might assess a horse at auction.

Then he eyed me up from head to toe.

'Do you want a job too, love?'

'No, thanks,' I replied. 'Got one already. I'm just her chaperone.'

'It's no touching. We throw them out straight away if they try anything,' he added hopefully.

I shook my head.

I did briefly consider selling my body for cash, though, aside from the risks involved, I would have preferred prostitution. It seemed more honest to me somehow. I found stripping a little contrived. Why go that far and not commit to the full deal? In any event, I decided I needed my nights free for gigs, and I needed a job that left me with plenty of energy to practise.

Charlotte lasted about a month at the club in Holborn

before she was sacked when one of the other girls reported her for leaving the premises with two customers.

A young couple. Innocent-looking as you like, Charlotte said. They'd come in late on a Friday night, the chap pleased as punch and his girlfriend excited and skittish, as if she'd never seen another woman's body in her life. The boyfriend had offered to pay for a dance, and his girlfriend had surveyed the room and picked Charlotte. Perhaps because she hadn't bought any proper stripper outfits yet, or had fake nails done like the other girls. It was Charlotte's point of difference. She was the only stripper who didn't look like a stripper.

The woman had become obviously aroused within seconds. Her boyfriend was blushing bright red. Charlotte enjoyed subverting the innocent, and she was flattered by their response to the movements of her body.

She leaned forward, filling the small space that was left between them.

'Want to come back to mine?' she'd whispered into both their ears.

After a little more blushing, they'd agreed and they'd all bundled into the back of a black cab and driven to her flat in Vauxhall. Charlotte's suggestion they go to theirs instead had been summarily turned down.

Her flatmate's face was a picture, she said, when he'd opened her bedroom door in the morning, without knocking, to bring her a cup of tea, and found her in bed with not just one stranger but two.

I didn't hear from Charlotte often now. London had a way of swallowing people up, and keeping in touch had never been a strong point of mine. I remembered the club, though.

The strip joint was not, as you might expect, down a darkened alleyway, but rather right off the main street, between a Pret a Manger and a sports retailer. There was an Italian restaurant a few doors further down that I'd been to on a date once, made memorable when I accidentally set the menu on fire by holding it open over the candle in the centre of the table.

The doorway was slightly recessed, and the sign above was not lit up in neon, but nonetheless if you looked at the place directly, from the blacked-out glass and the seedy-sounding name – Sweethearts – there was no mistaking it for anything other than a strip club.

Struck by a sudden burst of curiosity, I tucked my arm tightly over my violin case, stepped forward and pushed the door.

It was locked. Shut. Perhaps unsurprisingly at eight-thirty on a Thursday morning, they weren't open. I pushed against the door again, hoping it would give.

Nothing.

Two men in a white van slowed as they drove by and wound down their window.

'Come back at lunchtime, love,' one of them shouted. The expression on his face was of sympathy rather than attraction. In my black dress, still wearing last night's thick rock-chick make-up, I probably looked like a desperate girl looking for a job. So what if I was?

I was hungry now and my mouth was dry. My arms were beginning to ache. I was hugging my violin case tightly to my side, which I had a habit of doing when I was upset or stressed. I didn't have the heart to go into the French restaurant unshowered and dressed in yesterday's clothes. I didn't want the chef to think me uncouth.

I took the tube back to Whitechapel, walked to my flat, stripped out of the dress and curled up on my bed. My alarm was set for 3 p.m., so I could go back underground and busk for the afternoon commuters.

Even on my worst days, the days when my fingers felt as clumsy as a fist full of sausages and my mind felt like it was full of glue, I still found a way to play somewhere, even if it was in a park with pigeons for an audience. It wasn't so much that I was ambitious, or working towards a career in music, though of course I had dreams of being spotted and signed, of playing at the Lincoln Center or the Royal Festival Hall. I just couldn't help it.

I woke up at three feeling rested and a great deal more positive. I'm an optimist by nature. It takes a degree of madness, a very positive attitude or a bit of both to lead a person round the other side of the world with nothing but a suitcase, an empty bank account and a dream to keep them going. My poor moods never lasted long.

I have a wardrobe full of different outfits for busking, most of them garnered from markets and from eBay, because I don't have a lot of cash. I rarely wear jeans, as, with a waist much smaller, proportionately, than my hips, I find trying on trousers tedious, and I wear skirts and dresses nearly every day. I have a couple of pairs of denim cut-off shorts for cowboy days, when I play country tunes, but today, I felt, was a Vivaldi day, and Vivaldi requires a more classical look. The black velvet dress would have been my first choice, but it was crumpled in a heap on the floor where I had ditched it earlier that morning and needed to go back to the dry cleaner's. Instead, I selected a black,

knee-length skirt with a slight fishtail and a cream silk blouse with a delicate lace collar that I had bought from a vintage store, the same place I got the dress. I wore opaque tights and a pair of lace-up ankle boots with a low heel. The full effect, I hoped, was a little demure, gothic Victorian, the sort of look that I loved and Darren hated; he thought that vintage was a style for wannabe hipsters who didn't wash.

By the time I had reached Tottenham Court Road, the station where I had an agreed busking spot, the commuter crowd had just begun to pick up. I settled myself in the area against the wall at the bottom of the first set of escalators. I had read a study in a magazine that said that people were most likely to give money to buskers if they'd had a few minutes to make up their mind to tip. So it was handy that I was situated where commuters could see me as they rolled down the escalator and have a chance to fish out their wallets before they walked by. I wasn't immediately in their way either, which seemed to work for Londoners; they liked to feel as though they'd made a choice to step to one side and drop money in my case.

I knew that I ought to make eye contact and smile my thanks at the people who left coins, but I was so lost in my music I often forgot. When I was playing Vivaldi, there was no chance that I would connect with anyone. If the fire alarm had gone off in the station, I probably wouldn't have noticed. I put the violin to my chin and within minutes the commuters disappeared. Tottenham Court Road disappeared. It was just me and Vivaldi on repeat.

I played until my arms began to ache and my stomach began to gnaw, both sure signs that it was later than I had planned to stay. I was home by ten.

It wasn't until the next morning that I counted up my earnings and discovered a crisp red bill tucked neatly inside a small tear in the velvet lining.

Someone had tipped me fifty pounds.