

CHAPTER 3

In Suite 916 of 7060 Hollywood Boulevard at an enormous black desk, I found Gilson Simoes dressed in a general's jacket complete with military decoration.

It was like walking right into the void. The ambience alone could have killed a lesser mortal. A devastating despair hung on every breath of arid, air-conditioned oxygen in that office. The room was huge, everything was huge except for him and everything was monochrome except for me. Like an unscreened silent movie, everything was dead.

He was smaller than your average homo-sapien, so small that his appearance made even me feel tall. I sat down on a hard, black chair. My face began reddening from his curious glare as his tiny eyes scrutinized me from behind triple-glazed glasses. All talent executives do that to us. All model agents, managers, A&R departments; they all play that silent game during those tentative first few minutes. I handed over my portfolio like an awkward confession. Then they hold your fate in their hands and you - the critically ambitious one - sit helplessly suspended between a "yes" and a "no."

I smiled at his silence anyhow. I was hell-bent on keeping an open mind. After all, he had an office on Hollywood Boulevard. Surely he must be in the know. As he unzipped the portfolio he began to speak.

"So you're from England, huh?" he asked.

"Yes," I smiled.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked.

The cigarette, however, was already lit.

On the grey wall behind him was one picture: of Jesus Christ.

"Would it bother you if I drink?" he asked.

From a drawer he procured a large bottle concealed in a brown paper bag.

I watched with trepidation as he began flicking through my pictures. Beyond the enormous tinted windows I could see the skyscrapers of Downtown Los Angeles, which was the only sight

worth noticing from that ninth floor. Nothing more to see except the backs of high rise blocks, fire-escapes and palm trees, lots and lots of the tops of palm trees and that perpetually flawless sky. On such a sunny day it made me wonder why the windows were closed. I later learned they were permanently sealed shut.

"So what brings you to Hollywood?" asked the reptile-cum-casting-director, who had abandoned my portfolio to concentrate on his beer.

Gilson Simoes, I later learned, had been asking the same question to every wanna-be superstar who wandered off The Boulevard into his office for close on twenty years. I remember my answer.

I said, "well, I was wondering how I might, um ... get a part in a film."

Gilson Simoes laughed out loud.

"You gotta ask this guy," he said, and pointed at Jesus Christ.

I laughed too, because he was funny, very funny and his answer hammered home the absurdity of my situation. Nevertheless, I was determined, sitting there in my blue silk dress. I loved that dress, it made me proud to be female. I had bought it in a place and time where the indigenous population had bludgeoned femininity into obscurity. Back home anyone daring to look lovely is usually annihilated by the other girls. Dare to even frown upon the fat or the ugly and you will be accused of crimes against humanity while they - the champions of victim mentality - are free to accuse every shapely model of inciting anorexia in the young.

While drinking at the Comedy Store - circa 1997 - an American comedian said to me, "you're from Wales? You must be a fucking supermodel back there! I visited that place. Those women are a disgrace!"

Anyhow I had never dared to wear the blue silk dress in what many of those defiantly brash, fly-tipping, fat trash who have the

nerve to call 'God's Own Countree.' It was a classic design, that dress. I had bought it on a whim, as a fantasy life I could only find on a screen or in a magazine. It had a perfectly fitted button-up bodice, delicate buttons, mother of pearl. Sturdy nineteen fifties style straps, tiny white polka dots on deep navy silk and a knee-skimming skirt which danced when I walked. It was sweet relief to actually wear that dress without fear of being bullied. In Hollywood you are free to be pretty and - try as I might - I still cannot quite reduce the value of looking good to a superficial meaninglessness which the defiantly ugly use to console themselves with the reflection they must surely behold in yet another mirror cracked. My geographical origin is not conducive to blue silk dresses but these jeremiads are petty resentments now and I admit that I digress.

The aroma of cheap warm beer made me think of Wales and the smell was unnerving because I had not had a drink in almost five days. Every time that little man looked at me, the need for Dutch courage grabbed at my gut.

Gilson Simoes drank a brand of beer called 'Cobra,' the perfect name. Of course we are all reptilian in essence, but some hide it better than others. His penchant for Cobra was a subconscious admission of his lineage. More importantly, Cobra was the cheapest beer on The Boulevard. Gil stayed permanently partially inebriated on a steady drip of Cobra for the entire time I knew him and if any of us dared to point this out he would vomit the same vitriolic sentence at whomever had questioned his lucidity. He would shout "I'm the one drinking and everyone else is getting drunk!"

"There's something you need to know about me," said Gilson Simoes mid-way through my interview.

"I am a whore."

To enforce the declaration he spread his arms open wide and,

in so doing, obscured Jesus Christ.

He went on.

"I am a whore! I admit it! I don't do anything for free. Pay me fifty bucks and I'll see what I can do for you."

I shook my head. I was naïve, yes, and young and recklessly ambitious but I was not stupid.

And yet I later learned that Gilson's fee involved a strange caveat: he only took money from those he believed had 'it.'

I apparently had 'it.' But this story is not about me.

To would-be actors not in possession of the proverbial Hollywood 'it' Gilson was often brutal.

He would start with something like, "so, you're an actor, right?"

And the actor of the day - fresh off the bus - would nod in affirmation. Talent, one might say, is in the eye of the beholder, but Gilson could not tolerate these delusional primadonnas and so he served them up for lunch like an experimental soup.

He would say, "alright then, act! Right now! Cry for me. Right now!"

And the actor of the day would begin to silently seek motivation from across the black desk, twisting his face into a hideous grimace in an attempt to bring on convincing tears for this casting director whom he believed could make him famous.

While the process of faking it went on Gilson Simoes would go through his routine. At first he would screw up his eyes until he could take no more. Then he would attend to the very interesting matter of wiping cigarette ash - with the back of his hand - from the surface of the desk. He would then empty the ashtray with meticulous precision and light up again, all during the silent facial contortions of this 'actor' trying to cry. Whether the tears were achieved or not, Gilson would eventually cancel the show by shouting, "stop! Please, stop! You're terrible. You're really terrible. I can't take your money. You don't have 'it.'"

After the third time I refused to pay him any sort of fee, Gilson leaned upon his desk and gravely said to me, "lemme tell you something about Hollywood, Hun'..."

A profound fact paused to take flight from his tongue.

"Hollywood is full of snakes, vipers, rats, cheats and liars. The lowest of the low, they're all right here, in Hollywood."

"I understand," I said, in vain, "but I'll keep my money all the same."

"You know, Hun,'" he said, for he had called me 'Hun' from the get-go and that was, by then, my name. "I think you have 'it...'"

I sat up straight. A tantalising tingle rushed from my receiving ears to my narcissistic toes.

"Really?" I said.

"I think you can make it, Honey," he continued, "but not without me to protect you. 'Cos you don't know how to play da game. Hollywood is the most dangerous place in the world for someone like you. You got a boyfriend back in England?"

"Yes," I said.

"Forget him," said Gil, "he's gone. Think like he's dead. You got no boyfriend no more. You're in Hollywood now and you need to know how to play da game, 'cos Hollywood will destroy you. This is the most dangerous town in the world honey and here you come looking for yourself in it, are you outta your mind?"

All of a sudden I started to cry.

He reached across the abyss with a compassionate claw, an offering from his despair to mine. Through my tears I saw in his face deep indentations, fossils formed from an ambition which still possessed him as it now possessed me. I allowed him to touch my hand because I was so lost. The loneliest of loneliness had me by the throat. The shock of the past three days had finally floored me. I was starving and exhausted and all I had in the world to protect me was a reptile in a general's jacket. Gilson shook his head sadly.

"Where you staying, Hun?" he asked.

"The La Brea Motel," I said.

"Motel Hell?!" he exclaimed. "Are you outta your fucking mind? There's nothing but pimps and pushers over there! You gotta get outta there honey! And fast!"

I started to laugh.

"I'm not kiddin' Hun!" Gil went on. "You'll be fucking shot over there! Why don't you move into my office?"

Gilson Simoes lived in his office. He slept in a crawlspace just behind the reception area. Every night, like a vampire without a box, he would retreat to the crawlspace for a few hours of quiet contemplation before his next move upon the checkerboard of pink stars in the bloodsucking game of Hollywood snakes, vipers, rats, cheats and ladders.

To keep clean, he hosed himself down once a week at the YMCA on Santa Monica Boulevard. He subsisted on a daily diet of two bottles of Cobra, two packets of GPC cigarettes and three McDonald's cheeseburgers.

He never ventured far beyond the Hollywood borders although he often threatened us that one day he would abandon The Boulevard and go live on the beach in Santa Monica.

Gilson was as much a part of The Boulevard as Mann's Chinese Theatre but he was from the side of Hollywood too rarely seen by you. Normal people never came to the ninth floor. By the time I met him Gilson Simoes had been in Hollywood for twenty five years and still he had not made the big break. Not yet.

Discovering me made him again believe that his big break was imminent. Discovering me resurrected that especial enthusiasm which Hollywood aspirants need like normal people need air.

Now in order to make me famous, there was only one way. I had to learn how to 'play da game' and the only way I could learn to play that game was by adopting the same style of life as the general himself. I could not survive Hollywood on my own. I needed protection, I needed someone who could really help me. I had to move into the office and fast. I could hose myself down once a week at the YMCA on Santa Monica. It was the only way for me to learn how to 'play da game.'

I was having trouble thinking. It was time for an interlude in what the Americans call 'restroom.' I went into an enormous toilet cubicle and contemplated this strange invitation and my current position in life. Five thousand miles away I could hear exclamations from the people who claimed to know me in that strange place they called 'home.' The gossip travelled through the smog right into my imagination.

"She's living on Hollywood Boulevard," they would say.

Need the grotesque reality that I was shackled up with a vampire in an office without a bed and nowhere to wash ever need be told?

Didn't Oscar Wilde say, 'there is only one thing worse than being talked about and that is not being talked about...'

I had paid up front at the La Brea Motel for three nights. That cash was gone forever. I had so little money left that I had to take a risk.

Fear of destitution has depth and the anticipated shame which accompanies such destitution is almost commensurate to the British mentality. But strange to say, despite all the fear, I maintained an unwavering, underlying belief that something miraculous would happen to save me from the street.

Gifts from the gods come in many odd packages. Maybe Gilson's invitation was one such gift, maybe it came straight from Zeus himself...

I filed these ruminations in the back of my mind and returned to suite 916.

In my short absence the ambience of Gilson's Casting Office had been somehow, miraculously, transformed. A new vivacity was dancing in the room.

Across the back wall stood a long black sofa and I found myself sitting upon it as if I were already at home. From that new

angle I beheld the scene: Gilson Simoes, gleefully yelling, beside Jesus Christ, at a dark, male voice on the speakerphone.

"Chuck!" he was saying, "come on over man, come and meet my new star... I just discovered her, she's from England, the greatest country in the world. Come on over, man, you are gonna love her!"

He hung up and grinned at me. Behind the triple-glazed glasses his eyes were full of life. A wondrous excitement had superseded the former sad vacuum of the morning. The Hollywood Dream had returned with full force and I could feel it too. To the critically ambitious that vivacious dream takes us higher than any amphetamine.

Gilson said, "Honey, my friend is gonna come over and shoot the shit with me for an hour and I want you to stay cos you'll love it."

And so I agreed to stay. Of course I agreed to stay. I had nowhere else to go.
