

A SWISS-MISS IN THE BIG EASY

Chapter 1

There's a homogeneity in airport design which makes us willing participants on the travelling conveyor belt. It's early evening in the departure lounge at Philadelphia and it could be anywhere. I've just walked down yet another monotonous corridor that's identical to the one I walked down at Heathrow. I've travelled three and a half thousand miles and it feels as if I've gone nowhere.

I'm waiting for the connecting flight to New Orleans where I'm going for Mardi Gras and to meet someone I haven't seen for 38 years. The departure lounge is a scene of bored passengers drifting in and out, waiting on information from the muffled PA system. I hear an incomprehensible announcement. I ask a girl sitting near me if she understood what was said. She answers, but in a strange accent which I assume to be from another part of the US. She says Zone C can board now. I say: 'Are we Zone C?'

Zone C shuffles through to board, the girl behind me at my shoulder. I find my seat and see the girl is in the seat behind me. After landing at New Orleans, and as I retrieve my bag from the overhead compartment, I ask the girl if she'd had a good flight – as if I'm an insincere flight attendant. She smiles and says she did.

Thirty-eight years ago I was an art teacher in a school in rural Kent. I was a form master to a group of thirteen-year-old boys and girls. After I left teaching I kept in touch with a number of my pupils, one of whom was a talented musician called Jon Cleary. Aged 17, Jon went to New Orleans to find work as a piano player – it's Jon whom I'm meeting.

After a long wait, Arrivals empties and I am despairing of finding him. I have his phone number but no phone. Across the almost empty hall, I see the girl from the plane talking to another girl. I introduce myself and ask if they have a phone I could use. The other girl, who is called Meredith, lends me her phone. I call Jon who says he is in another part of Arrivals. After a few minutes, he appears. I introduce Jon to the girls. The girl from the plane is called Angela and is German-Swiss – hence her accent. Meredith is an out of work dancer, but working as a waitress in a Downtown restaurant. She tells Jon she was waiting on him at his table last night. I'm impressed by her good memory and by the coincidence in a city of millions. Angela is her friend and is here on holiday. Before we part, we agree to meet again and swap e-mail addresses.

Jon and I go straight to a bar in the district (or ward) where he lives and catch up on the last thirty-eight years. Jon is now 51 and a pianist and guitarist for various US performers and bands –he has his own band called The Absolute Monster Gentlemen. We are joined by Jon's record producer, a chap called John Porter, an erstwhile guitarist with Roxy Music.

Jon lives with his wife, Trish, in a rambling building in the Bywater ward close to the French Quarter – the street parallel to his is called Desire, which had a streetcar named after it. The ground floor has Jon's music room and recording studio. They live on the next two floors where, in the hall, is a cottage upright piano that Jon cannot pass without playing.

On my first morning, Jon is driving me to the French Quarter when we are caught in a traffic jam caused by a television crew shooting a street scene. Standing on a traffic island is a lone figure whom I assume to be one of the actors waiting for his call.

I say to Jon: "I think that's Clarke Peters?"

"The actor.? Yes."

“He used to be my neighbour in Wiltshire”

The man appears to recognise Jon’s car and comes over to say hello.

“Jesus motherfucking Christ! what are you doing here?”

I tell him I’m staying with Jon. Jon it appears is also a friend of Clarke’s. New Orleans seems to me to be a small place. We arrange to meet that evening for a tour of the music bars.

When we get back to Jon’s, after seeing the French Quarter, he says there’s an e-mail from Angela saying Meredith’s place is not far away and she’d like to bicycle over to see us? Jon mails her directions. She replies, saying she’ll come over immediately. I go into the street to intercept her. At the airport I’d not properly registered Angela; now, as the bicycle approaches, I see a slim, pretty, short-haired, gamine-like figure with high cheekbones. She joins us for coffee and is a confident, friendly, intelligent girl but perhaps a little serious. I learn she is a law student in Zurich, is thirty-one years old and speaks eight languages – including Arabic –her parents are Calvinist pastors in Swiss prisons.

Hearing of our evening tour of the music bars, she asks if she and Meredith can tag along. That evening we pick up Clarke from his bachelor lodgings and the girls from Meredith’s small apartment in a rundown area contiguous to Bywater. With Jon as our expert guide, we go to Frenchmen Street. It becomes apparent to me that Jon is well-known in New Orleans –as is Clarke. I now understand why Meredith had such a clear memory of Jon being at her restaurant table. The two girls appear intimidated by their presence and after going into a conspiratorial huddle tell us they are going on elsewhere. Jon, Clarke, Trish and I drift from one dark bar to another into the early hours.

In the morning Jon takes me to Congo Square in the Tremé ward where slaves were allowed to congregate on Sundays. A market grew up which attracted singers and musicians using improvised instruments – here jazz was born.

Afterwards, Jon drives me round the Lower Ninth ward, next to Bywater on the eastern side. It’s the ward first to be flooded after Hurricane Katrina. Eight years have passed yet it still appears freshly devastated. The area looks like a mouth with rotten teeth – there are gaps where houses were swept away or destroyed. Jon says for the residents the trauma is still real.

The houses are one-storied and wooden; about a third are missing. Those few homes that were insured have been restored, but the majority who had uninsured homes abandoned them to stay with friends and relatives, often in other cities, and have not returned. The houses still have the markings daubed on them to prove that after the flood they had been searched by official rescue parties. The markings are in the form of a St Andrew’s cross, in the four quartiles of which is written the name of the search party; the date of the search; any animals found; whether there is a hazard, such as escaping gas, and the number of dead found.

There is one brick-built house which Jon tells me is Fats Domino’s. He was born and brought up here and never left. However, he could afford to build a new house in the neighbourhood style, but in storm-resistant brick.

We go to the first levee to be breached. Spray-painted in the grass are the words: R.I.P. RUF1. I look across the Mississippi, which at this point must be nearly a mile wide, and it *is* mighty.

At night, in the Lower Ninth, Jon takes me to a bar. Inside it’s dark, the only light coming from behind the bar. There are three Black guys and a barman who welcome two white middle-aged, middle-class Englishmen. An old boy comes in. He has been celebrating his birthday and is in a cheerful, but complaining mood. He says all his eight children – who, he explains, were born to his five wives - have forgotten his birthday. However, it’s also his dog Jo-Jo’s birthday and all the children have sent Jo-Jo a card. He is a happy drunk and laughs at his complaining.

Chapter 2

I hire a car to explore Louisiana and to give Jon and Trish a break. Trish says I should go to a town near Lafayette which, every year on the Saturday before Mardi Gras, hosts the annual Zydeco festival. Zydeco is a Louisiana Creole music - a relative of Cajun. The name comes from the Creole pronunciation of *les haricots* which comes from an expression: '*Les haricots ne sont pas salés*' - the beans have no salt - meaning idiomatically, times are hard.

Angela - who has bicycled over for coffee - asks if she can come with me. My immediate thoughts are confused: why is she abandoning Meredith? Where do we stay? She's half my age. Can she, a student, afford it? Will we get on? And what a strange girl to be trusting a stranger in the unknown depths of Louisiana. Since she's a pretty girl and I'm curious as to the outcome, I agree.

That evening I'm to cook jambalaya for Jon and Trish. Thinking it would be wise to get to know Angela a little, I ask her and Meredith to join us. Jambalaya is essentially a ham and seafood paella (hence the name - *jamon* and *paella*). The main ingredients are cooked separately and combined at the end. I'm about to assemble the dish when Angela says she doesn't like prawns. They are an essential part of Jambalaya.

Two days later we set off. On the road to Lafayette, via Baton Rouge, we stop for a coffee for Angela and a beer for me. She complains that I'm drinking and driving.

Trish has suggested that we rent a bayou cabin for the night. In remote country, about ten miles from the Zydeco festival town of Breaux Bridge, we find a small complex of rented bayou cabins. The owner, a kindly middle-aged woman, shows us around; she is a little bemused by my and Angela's relationship: being two different nationalities it's unlikely we are father and daughter. It appears all the cabins are for couples and only have double beds. Angela says she doesn't mind sharing a bed with me as she's scared of being alone. The woman says there is one cabin with two bedrooms, I assume this will solve the problem, so I take it.

In the evening we find a garishly lit redbrick restaurant off a highway behind a billboard in a field. It's a music venue and advertises the musicians who've played there - from Bob Dylan to ZZTop. It's a large open plan restaurant with seating for about 200, and tonight it's packed. We are found a table for two. All the customers are middle-aged and white. However, there is one crowded table at which sits a black woman: she stands and pulls out her companion's wheelchair and heads to the ladies loo. The only Black customer is a servant - but at least she's sitting with her masters. During our meal, Angela disapproves of my drinking more than one glass of wine.

Back at the bayou cabin, we retire to our separate rooms. I switch on my television and am watching, of all things, a production of *The Taming of the Shrew* on PBS, when Angela walks in. She says she's cold and gets into my bed, cuddling up to me for warmth. I am bemused - is she truly cold? is she scared of being alone? Is this sexual? I'm flattered - she's an attractive girl. She says in her German accent: "I do not do kissing". Is that not what prostitutes say?

After a while, she suddenly pulls away. There is a long silence. In the half-light, she begins to confess:

Ten days ago, she tells me, she had been in Cairo. The Swiss Development Corporation needed an Arabic speaker and asked her to be a translator at a conference in Cairo. She was given a driver - a moonlighting Egyptian student. An attractive young man, but she disliked him because of his attitude towards women, especially Western women. However, because of their necessary propinquity, they got to know each other. Also, because of a perverse form of

evangelism on behalf of her gender, she thought if she had sex with him it might change his mind about Western women. So, lust substituting for thought, they had sex. Just the once, and then she returned to Zurich. She says she changed her mind just now because it's too soon after the Cairo encounter. I'm thinking: what an interesting anecdote, but it doesn't explain why she is in my bed. She's had a Calvinist upbringing and I'm the same age as her father – however, it's flattering that an attractive girl, half my age, has offered herself – but then withdrawn the offer.

She has a series of arcane tattoos on her arms and leg: her upper arm has an image of an oval antique frame within which is the Roman numeral 'X'. Her other arm has a lamp with a bulb and some wires – she says it was done when she was in a dark place. And her upper thigh has a series of black dots getting smaller as they ascend to her crotch.

The Zydeco festival starts at nine in the morning at the Café des Amis. Breaux Bridge is an undistinguished little town. The café's in a plain wood and brick late 19th-century building, such that one expects a hitching-post to be outside. There is a long queue and couples dance in the dusty street to the music emanating from the café. Inside it's crowded with people at tables having brunch, or dancing to the zydeco bands, which, along with the usual guitars and drums, have a sort of washboard called a frottoir. The bands are loud and rocking and everyone is having a good time. Except for Angela. She's hating the music. She also disapproves of me drinking beer in the morning and of men dancing with more than one girl. This daughter of Calvinists who last night got into my bed.

Back in the Big Easy, Mardi Gras is a few days away and the city is putting on mini-parades. On the day, we meet up with John and Linda and a friend of theirs called Tim who is dressed as a bumblebee. Linda has brought a sort of fudge laced with magic mushrooms. I take a bite but after a few minutes, it's having no effect so I take another bite. It's foolish because even cannabis has a bad effect on me. I'm beginning to think that Tim is a real bumblebee. But the bumblebee realizes I'm in trouble and looks after me. We wander the streets swarming with costumed people. A man is dressed top to bottom as a cannabis plant with smoke billowing from the leaves. A woman squeezes past him with a baby in her arms, breathing in the smoke. A man dressed as the disgraced cyclist, Lance Armstrong has a bottle and drip-feed needle inserted into his arm. He sounds like the voice of Montgomery Burns from *The Simpsons* – maybe it is Mr Burns? His wife is dressed as Oprah Winfrey - maybe it is Oprah Winfrey? A band marches down the street but another band marches down the other way. They meet and march through each other, still playing. The cacophony sounds like a Charles Ives composition.

The people on the multitude of themed floats are called Krews. A double-decker bus as a float goes by with a Krew called The Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club. They are all Black men and women but all are 'blacked-up'. Jon tells me it's a tradition. Another tradition is that the crowd are showered from every passing float with necklaces of beads. The success of the Mardi Gras is measured at the end of the day by the weighing of the beads by the street cleaners. We pass the house of a Black friend of Jon's, a drummer, who invites us in for lunch where there are tables laden with food and drink for anyone calling in on the off chance. On the wall I see a photograph of the drummer at The White House, shaking hands with President Nixon.

Chapter 3

Two days later I'm preparing to leave by train to Los Angeles and then to hire a car and drive to San Francisco. I'm discussing my itinerary with Jon and Trish when Angela arrives having again bicycled over for coffee. Hearing of my plans she asks if she can come with me. Because of the

incident in the bayou cabin, this surprises me; but how do I refuse her request? I say I doubt whether she will get a ticket at short notice and the two-day sleeper journey is expensive as I'm travelling First-class. I ask where she will stay in LA? How will she return to New Orleans and Meredith? She is still determined to join me. I suggest the first thing is to see if she can get a ticket as a supplement to my couchette, assuming she can't. She rings the station and comes back to say she's got a ticket and that she'll fly back from San Francisco. How do I refuse? – she's coming.

Two days later Jon and Trish come to the New Orleans railway station to wave us off. As we are about to board, Trish whispers into my ear and says, in her no-nonsense New Yorker way: "That girl's a cunt!".

The train is prosaically named the Sunset Limited. It takes two days and two nights and 2000 miles through Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. It's a double-decker: the lower section has the bars and the loos and the luggage; the upper section, the observation cars, the couchettes and restaurants. Angela's first words are: "I hope you don't think I'm going to allow you to sleep with me".

It is not a romantic long-distance train with spacious lounges and restaurant cars. The corridors are claustrophobic; our first class couchette is cramped: there is a tiny loo/shower and a small sink; the beds fold out from the wall and are lowered to provide narrow seating. Consequently, we spend our days in the observation car reading in silence.

On the first evening, we pull into San Antonio, Texas, where the train stops for four hours. Experienced travellers know this and have booked cabs to go into town. We go to bed and wake at dawn, we are still in Texas; it's lunchtime – in Texas; evening arrives – in Texas. It's bedtime – we are still in Texas.

In the observation car, diagonally opposite us, is a black family of a husband and wife and two teenage children; they play cards constantly and are friendly and cheerful. Opposite them is a lone, red-faced middle-aged white man in a check shirt. He appears to be permanently angry and resentful of the black family enjoying themselves. Angela is uninterested in our fellow passengers, and in me; she is reading a book. She refuses to tell me what it is other than it changed her life; when she's not reading she hides it. I suspect it's a self-help book.

I wonder why she bothered to come and can only speculate that she needed to leave Meredith alone. She'd been sleeping on her floor and Meredith's boyfriend is coming from LA to stay and she could be a gooseberry. But it's an expensive way of making yourself scarce. The Black card-playing mother senses there is frost between us and shoots me sympathetic glances.

First-class passengers get free meals. Angela has to share a dining table with me as she is on a supplement to my ticket. She ignores anybody who joins our table, and continues to be fussy about her food and disapproving of my drinking. Out of the window is a landscape of mile after mile of desert or parched scrub. It's an event when a juggernaut is glimpsed cruising along a distant highway.

We pull into LA station at 5,30 in the morning. We have two hours to wait before the hire car people open at 7.30. She disappears for a coffee, a drink to which she seems addicted. On the station concourse, I come across the mother of the card-playing family. She's a large woman eating a large sandwich, she greets me and offers me a bite of her sandwich. She gives me a bear hug. I assume it's a sympathy hug.

In the hire car, within minutes of leaving the station, we are stopped by the cops: I had hesitated at an ambiguous one-way sign. The cop is unsympathetic. I act the ignorant Englishman, but he continues to interrogate. Angela is siding with the cop. I apologise and he asks where I'm heading, and I say Santa Monica and ask him for directions which he gives and sends us on our way. Angela continues to blame me.

In Santa Monica we are to have lunch with an English couple I met sixteen years earlier whilst teaching art in Spain. He had been on holiday with his wife, Sandra. He is a retired production designer called Terry Marsh and has two Oscars, for *Dr Zhivago* and *Oliver!*.

The Marshes live in the Pacific Palisades overlooking the sea. At lunch, I ask Terry about the filming of *Dr Zhivago*. Angela who has been mostly silent (she later tells me she was intimidated by the Marsh's luxurious home) tells us that *Dr Zhivago* was one of the few films she saw as a girl, her parents having forbade her from going to the cinema. She says her parents had no television, her only access being at a girlfriend's house where their favourite programme was *Baywatch*. She's thrilled when Terry says that *Baywatch* was filmed on the beach below us – presumably, she's thrilled at being so close to the site of the sexual fantasies of her Calvinist teens.

After lunch, we set off for San Francisco. Angela complains I must be drunk having had wine at lunch. We are heading for a hotel about halfway to San Francisco, but I need petrol. There are no gas stations on the highway. We drive off to find one in the countryside. We pull into a remote station where a woman with a Yorkshire terrier is emerging from the washroom clutching a bowl of water for her dog. As she stoops to put it down the station attendant cries out for her to stop. He explains that all the water in this area is contaminated and undrinkable – even for dogs. The woman, in horror, gathers up her pooch and drives away.

The hotel is called *The Madonna Inn*. It's sited close to Willian Randolph Hearst's fantasy Hearst Castle and has many of the latter's fixtures and fittings. Bedrooms are in cabins scattered throughout acres of parkland. Each one is themed. I have booked the 'Ice House' but am given the 'Mexican' cabin.

At Reception, we are directed to our cabin. But there is no heating and no instructions and I'm unable to get it working. Angela, exasperated by my incompetence, shows an unexpected practical side and gets it working. We have supper in the main house with its ornate Hearst furniture and a spectacularly vulgar staircase from the Castle. Our fellow guests seem very much at home in these surroundings.

The next day we reach San Francisco. I park outside my hotel on a steep hill near Union Square. It's a convention in San Francisco, unknown to me, that, when parking one's car, the front wheels must be turned out facing the street. I'm told off by the hotel desk clerk for not doing so. Angela chides me for my ignorance – as if she was cognizant of the convention - and demands the car keys. She goes out to the car and turns the wheels to the correct angle, returning with her suitcase and saying she's not staying as she's going to some friends of Meredith's. This is news to me. I ask her where, and she refuses to say. I suspect she's going to find another hotel.

On the street outside we say goodbye. I watch her walk away along the sidewalk until, in the distance, I see her little red beret disappear into the crowd. It's brave and pig-headed of her; she's young, pretty and alone in a strange city.

I feel relief and sadness at seeing her go. I regret that someone who was initially interesting, intelligent and enigmatic should become an irritating encumbrance and a willful cold-fish. Yet I am flattered that someone so young and attractive had twice sought my company and even attempted a seduction of sorts. In the end, however, Trish's crude summation is probably true. I never hear from her again.

I need a drink and go to the nearest bar. I'm sitting in an alcove reading my book when, out of the corner of my eye, I'm aware of a proffered brown hand. I look up to see a young man wanting to shake my hand. We do so and he sits down at my table. I've been only minutes in public in San Francisco, and I'm already living the cliché of being picked up in a gay bar. He asks me my name and out of politeness I reply. He's charming, but after a while, he realises I'm not

gay. We chat and I learn of his life in India and England as an electrical engineering student.

On leaving the bar, a woman of about forty, with dyed ash-blonde hair and rotten teeth, approaches me. "I've never done this before", she says, "but you look so much like my late husband I feel I can ask you – I need money for my baby daughter so's I can buy her some diapers". I politely remark on her imaginative pitch and pass on. Further along the sidewalk is a stick-thin teenage boy in tight gold-coloured trousers and tap-dancing shoes. He's wearing a fedora and playing the trumpet with one hand, and tap-dancing. All the passers-by ignore him. The next day I leave San Francisco and fly back to England – making sure to avoid all encounters in departure lounges.

THE END