

St Michael

One

Fellow students called him a snob; to this he always flatly stated that he was merely exercising 'discernment'. Chaz's disinterest in humanity meant he had an inflamed identification with the inorganic. Objects, textures, flat images etc. He liked to overuse the term *edit*, applying it to his work continually. When his tutor Barbara had commented on the two looks created for his mid-term assignment she had enthused that the findings chosen for the dresses had looked like jewels in a case. The diamante had glittered on velvet and his heart pulsed.

He had been considered promising by everyone in the Glasgow School of Art Textile Department, because of his unusually convincing rhetoric for every aesthetic decision. The mid-term outfits had been based, he explained, around the theme of the 'Non Extant Noble Savage', taking vernacular costume from European nations without colonial empire and combining them with motifs from Central Africa. Diamond (imitation), copper and rubber were all used as embellishments. He had caused a sensation when the group for whom he had been commissioned to create stage costume had played at the Vic, the schools' student union building, one Thursday. Shelly, Caitlin and Ruth, all graduates from Murals and Stained Glass, had appeared live with crudely hacked off hair and ripped tea dresses made from curtains. He claimed their look was to evoke the publicly humiliated French woman accused of sleeping with Germans during the Occupation. Some fresh faced feminists had complained but he argued his case and hooted at their retreating backs that "They wouldnae know style if it walked them down the aisle!" He ran his hand over his lush quiff in defiance.

Despite the flamboyance and talent, by the time of his degree show he had blown whatever capability he had. Firstly, he had been picked to be one of the few male models in the fashion show that year which caused him a great sense of distraction. Instead of being insulated from the other students' problems he was on continual call for fittings, run-throughs and meetings. Not to mention his own private time consuming anxiety about his appearance.

Secondly, two months before the show he had been dumped by his lover Jill. She had dropped out of school to pursue her main interest which was taking drugs. He had been abandoned along with the rest of that particular life; she had several and was concentrating on another. A trip to the doctor confirmed that he had contracted two sexually transmitted diseases. His humiliation was compounded by the itching down his body. The over-sexed bitch had persuaded him to remove with Immac the hair on his chest and genitals; claiming it was much more attractive that way. Now, alone in his bed-sit looking at the half assembled collection, it grew back and scratched him like hell.

But the main reason that he never claimed his rightful role as official Next Big Thing was that even though he felt no real compassion for others he desperately needed their company. He wanted an audience now and then but mostly he just liked to be quietly part of the Glasgow scene, around what was going on. The axis at the GSA at that time, summer '86, was a robust dialogue between Art and Pop, and there was so much going on; bands to see, clubs, parties and performances.

He and George spent a lot of time drinking coffee in the Equi, on the periphery of the Postcard Records clique. But the Cul de Sac in Ashton Lane was the main place to be at that time and he could kill the afternoon whipping up a new shirt to wear that night rather than pattern cut for the ten garments he still had to finalise. He slagged off Jill and her arsehole junkie mates, leaving out the degrading details, in Nicos on a Thursday. Late Thursday nights meant he could not drag himself in for the Friday lectures. Instead he would emerge late and go for egg and chips in the Grosvenor Café, invariably running into someone and heading for an early pint in His Nibs. Or the Amphora, or Lymburns.

The majority of his class hung out in the Athol Arms, but he preferred the Griffin, favoured by a larger contingent of art school girls. He discussed the upcoming fashion show with the other models and explained at length his degree collection. It was to deal, he described, with 'Ideological Time Walls'. He was using polar elements signifying the Cold War to cloak and suppress each other. He had constructed drab workers overalls and uniforms with 1950's rayon underwear showing through. He was working right now with two different types of fur, horizontal striped fox for the West and second hand, shapeless bearskin for the East to be worn over soft draped suits. The girls lapped it up. "How's it going?", "Can we see it?" they enquired. He used some of their inevitable disapproval of the use of animal skin as the excuse to demure that his studio was not open to visitors. In actuality he had no idea where he was going to get, let alone how he could afford fur in any quantity.

After a Wednesday runway rehearsal he chummed Ken, Gerry and Tamsin down to see what was on show at Transmission. They went on to the Mitre bar with the collective for a pint. Heading home he would stop off in Norsk, occasionally Ciao, though it was yet to become the hip hangout it would turn into a year or so later. He would catch last orders in the Halt, or make it to the Dolphin Bar where he listened in on a meeting for M8, a magazine in the pipeline that was to show Glasgow at its chicest. The editors didn't invite him to join because he was firmly associated with Rocket 88, a fashion fanzine they thought illustrated everything that was wrong with the city. Which reminded him, he had to finish those drawings for the next issue. He would take tomorrow off to do that.

There were clubs nights and concerts he could not bear to miss. Joannas on Bath Street had folded sadly, and Satallite City had passed its prime, but the Rock Garden was in full swing and he spent many nights in a bequiffed & 501'd space, hoping to catch another glimpse of Claire Grogan among the Americana tat. Tiffany's and Maestro's where conveniently close

after closing time at the Vic. He saw the Fruits of Passion play at Nightmoves, Sophisticated Boom Boom at Henry Afrikas and Blue Rondo A La Turk at Panama Jax. He had vague memories of seeing Johnny and the Self Abusers with Endgames at the Mars Bar. Or was it Ultrateque? Or even FIXX II on Miller Street? Yes it was; there had been droves of A&R guys up from London Tommy Udo had enthused in his Streets Ahead column.

The day of the show arrived quickly and unexpectedly. Backstage he got into an argument over who was going to be first, him or Cristobel, to send their girl down the catwalk wearing a fish tank. That year there had been two, but his had been so cobbled together and poorly executed that Cristobel's, with the hand tooled leather straps and fancy guppies that danced in the sloshing water around the models naked hips had been given preference. He refused to accept it. His nerves were so raw from a sleepless week trying desperately to produce something he could present. If only he hadn't taken that fortnight off to assist Trish Biggar in the wardrobe department at the Citz Theatre. Barbara Santos Shaw and the other tutors had witnessed his outburst and the obviously thrown together mess he wanted to present and backed Christobel. He pulled the outfit out of the show completely. And withdrew as a model leaving five classmates in tears; there were no back-ups ready to replace him. But he still sent the rest of his collection into the public gaze; his girls shuffled down the runway in badly fitting pencil skirts. There was the high sound of women's laughter at what looked like a fun fur sleeping bag, even the model Kirsty was suppressing laughter on the catwalk. Before it was even over he had left the building for a drink and never returned.

Two

Chaz was on his way to Cumbernauld, travelling up in his car from Stevenage. His job required him to visit shitholes on a regular basis, though the circuit was getting smaller as the factories shut down. He had been a quality checker for Marks & Spencer since '95, for two years. People generally didn't stay in the job long because going round telling small businesses, often family owned, that they were being bankrupted was not popular. He had initially been taken on to work on the Per Una collection at a time when it was clear things were not going well for the company. He had not lasted long because he felt nothing but indifference for their 'core customer' and could not stick to budget. So he had fallen down the pile until he ended up here, the end of the road, barely supporting his family and alcoholism.

Marks & Spencer was in the process of sending all production to the second and third worlds. He knew how irrationally tough their quality checking was on an industry that was fundamentally sound. He also knew that Britain, especially Scotland was being abandoned because of the increasing pressure from high street competitors using cheap labour. But above all else he knew the structure of Marks and Spencer was so antiquated

and dysfunctional that it was rotting internally and that he dealt with that on the front line with their suppliers when he spoke with false authority.

The factory of McAlpine & Wilson had set up in the last ten years with a small business grant. Craig McAlpine was an industrial producer, but his partner Jeanette Wilson had been a graduate from textiles like him, though in her case the School of Textiles and Design in Galashiels. He had worked with some of her type in his past in the series of boring department shop posts he had had since leaving school. He found Galashiels milliners unbearable; monologues about patterns and systems, all afflicted with the same earnest sense of their 'worth' as artists. UNEMPLOYABLE he had written across the last application from there he had reviewed at Per Una. He was welcomed as usual onto the shop floor to be ignored by the piece workers at their stations and then a side room with samples ready for his inspection. He removed his forms and guidelines and patted the Checkers Gauge that hung on a chain around his neck. Craig and Jeanette looked haggard, and on seeing his sour and distant expression also resigned.

Their first professional encounter had been when he dropped off an order to Cut / Make / Trim one hundred and fifty skirts with the accompanying specifications sheet and sample. Everything had gone well. There had been a few quality issues which he had outlined to be rectified in the next job and from there they had worked together many times. The factory had gone from devoting a third of its output to Marks & Spencer in '95 to all of it in '97, taking on extra staff and working through the night. Craig McAlpine had said to Jeanette whenever she complained of how fussy the company was that they always supplied good quality fabric to work with and an association with such a British institution was good for business. What was the alternative? All other clients had fallen away as everything was devoted to Marks & Spencer.

Chaz was here to review an order of five thousand men's winter coats, half way through the timetable of production. Everything was hanging, bagged and tagged as it should be and he removed the first six samples to examine.

With piece work the problem was the girls, and it was invariably girls or woman in this menial job, only the cutters were ever men. A good piece worker's brain is elsewhere as she assembles; making shopping lists, getting on with her life, whatever, but her hands deal with the monotonous task in front of her. But some piece workers can't disassociate and they make mistakes, or get impatient and greedy. While no-one is looking they lengthen the stitch on their machine to produce faster. Many employers weld the stitch length knob fixed or simply remove it all together.

This is what the Checkers Gauge was for. It had teeth that measured a sixteenth, eighth, half an inch and one inch for quick inspection. He darted it over the first garment taking notes

on the length of all stitches including overlapped edges, the top stitching on pockets and on the buttons that should be lock rather than single stitched.

He methodically made his way through all six coats. Two of them had irregularities on the top stitching he explained to the expectant factory owners. Jeanette turned white and buried her face in a fleece scarf. He blankly removed another six samples and examined them in exactly the same way. After fifteen minutes of note taking he stood up, straightened and announced "There's a problem here too, so the order has to be cancelled."

"You're joking I take it!" Craig folded his arms and cocked his head ironically.

"No, M 'n' S can't take these faulty goods, the finish's not good enough, we can't put them on the rails."

"We've been working solid on this job the last six months! We've lost all my other clients. Paul Smith ... BHS ... we said no to them for this job!"

Jeanette interjected, coming to stand squarely in front of Chaz.

"We had to hire sixty extra full time staff to get these done on time, took out a bank loan to pay them. You're going to kill us!"

"I'm sorry, but you'll also receive a bill for the fabric that you owe us for."

His hand automatically swept over his bald head, the hair and hairstyle long gone, but the nonchalant gesture remaining.

Jeanette started to form a sentence but gave up. Her shoulders sagged

lower; Craig looked angrier and angrier. Chaz was used to it; he's done it at least a dozen times this year. They stood in silence; a voice at the door said,

"Fuck him. Just detag 'em and sell 'em, I'll dae it for yis." It was a 17 year old girl, surrounded by at least twenty women of different ages clamouring to get a look in at the end of an era.

"Read your contract." Chaz stated flatly, packing his things. "You know fine well about the court case concerning that kind of illegal use of our products."

"Oh what does it fucking well matter now ya wee fuck. We're out a job and yous lot are off to China anyway, fucking scum!"

"You'll lose your shite job too bawbags." came another scornful voice.

"And what's this about dropping 'St Michael' anyway? Because of Palestine? Hope you all get fucking car bombed" said another woman.

"Get out" said McAlpine & Wilson simultaneously and he did.