

Shopped

A True Story of Secret Shopping
and Self-Discovery

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PROLOGUE

The Vertiginous High Heels



I knew it was a mistake to wear these shoes. Vertiginous, sleek and an absolute bargain to boot, they look great, and they're perfect for the role I'm about to play, but they're about as impractical as you can get, as I have discovered after an eight-minute sprint to the station. I should have stuffed some pumps into my bag but the rolled-up copy of *Elle* poking out of one end of my equally unsuitable bag took priority. To add insult to injury I have to stand for the duration of the tube journey and my feet are starting to throb. It's 10 a.m. I balance, flamingo-style,

on one spike heel, bending the other foot up to meet my hand so I can massage my crushed toes.

I see my reflection through a gap in the bowed commuter heads. I look distinctly dishevelled – this was not part of the plan, my character simply doesn't have the time for untidiness in her life. In a futile attempt to look groomed I tuck the stray sections of hair springing from my temples back behind my ears. I should have worn a hat. My hair never does what it's supposed to do and today I needed it to look neat. Damn, a hat would have been just right for my character too. Perhaps I should buy one on my way from the station? But then I'll be ten quid down before I've even got to where I'm going. This is to be a frugal month, which means swapping the Pret sandwiches for my crap home-made ones and staying away from sample sales. Otherwise, there will be no summer holiday this year.

I sigh, prompting a tut from a fellow passenger who doesn't even look up from her *Metro*. Her black coat completely drains her face of colour, a pale blue would have been so much better, however it doesn't seem as if this lady is looking forward to a pale-blue kind of day. Funny how the female half of the population relies so heavily on black, I don't think I've ever heard a bloke opting for a black garment 'because it's slimming'. I grin as I'm reminded of the on-going debate I have with a friend about his awful orange jumper. Oh, I may not look like I know stuff, with my messy hair and silly shoes, but I do.

I pull my bag closer to my side as I step carefully down the station steps, sensibly shod commuters rushing past me on either side. Today I am going to be one of them: a successful, self-assured businesswoman on the lookout for expensive new shoes. I set off down Sloane Street, the confident stride in my step belying my concern over a bad hair day. Chauffeur-driven cars with blacked-out windows sit on single yellow lines, awaiting their passengers who will eventually emerge laden down with purchases. What must that be like, I wonder? I am not one of those shoppers, not today or any day.

A beautiful evening dress catches my eye and, as I stand back and admire it sparkling in its spotlight, and looking otherworldly on this blustery autumn day, I can't help but imagine myself in it, posing on a red carpet, the possibility of an award mere minutes away. I turn to look at my reflection side on, chin perched on one shoulder, to check there are no ladders in my tights. Do I look the part? I mustn't be found out: calling the client to say my cover has been blown is not an option. I have worked hard to earn a reputation for being reliable and thorough, and I'm not about to throw it away on account of my costume. I lean further towards the polished glass to check my teeth, so immersed in my own thoughts that at first I fail to notice the member of staff on the other side of the twinkling mannequin, looking curiously at me as I study myself, teeth bared.

Embarrassed, I move quickly on. As I approach my destination I reapply my lipstick, run my fingers through my hair one last time, smile my rehearsed high-flying smile to myself and graciously purr 'Good morning' to the looming security guard as he pulls open the door for me.

The smell of freshly polished mirrors and the softest buttery leather fills the air. 'Good morning, how are you today?' asks the pretty woman, who smiles warmly as she approaches me, not a hair out of place, regulation flat pumps on her feet. 'Can I help you?'

I take a deep breath. 'I certainly hope so . . .'

CHAPTER ONE

The Navy Blue Anorak with Red Trim



1972 was quite a year. Edward Heath was prime minister, *The French Connection* won the Academy Award for best film, David Bowie introduced Ziggy Stardust to the world and Stan Smith won the men's singles championship at Wimbledon. That same month, London saw its first Gay Pride march and *Are You Being Served?* – based on the Simpson's Department Store in Piccadilly – was the programme everyone watched on the box. It was also the year that the French Connection clothes chain and *Cosmopolitan* magazine were launched.

I too arrived in 1972, in March and nine days late, a first baby for my parents and a first granddaughter following five grandsons, for my maternal grandparents. When my twenty-four-year-old mum woke with tummy pains the day before I was born, she put it down to having eaten something dodgy and set off to do some shopping. It was my mum's school friend Heather, a nurse like my mum, who suggested that perhaps it might be an idea to call the hospital. Luckily Heather had been listening that day at medical school otherwise I might have been born on a shop floor somewhere.

My parents Richard and Penny met in 1965 and married five years later. They had both moved to London to embark on their careers. My dad's job as an investigative reporter on the *Daily Mirror* and my mum's nursing training at London's Middlesex Hospital meant they worked shifts and they shared a small flat at 166 Finchley Road in north London with Val, one of Mum's nursing friends.

My aunt Judith – Jude – an actress, had married her second husband, the comedian Dave Allen, in 1964 after a whirlwind romance in Australia where both were working. David had made a name for himself on television there, but when Jude returned to England, where she had a young son and a successful acting career, he followed her back. My dad was introduced to David shortly before he met my mum. The two of them got on famously; David's father had worked at the *Irish Times* but more importantly

my dad and David shared a wicked sense of humour. Dad ended up asking David to be his best man. To the thrill of my twenty-two-year-old mum, this meant that on the first day of their Paris honeymoon, a photograph of their rain-soaked wedding (my mum beaming broadly in between these two small, dark and handsome men) appeared in the *Sunday Express*.

My mum claims that she, Val and Penny, another nursing friend, were the first to strut down the King's Road in Chelsea in miniskirts. Whether or not this is true, there is certainly evidence that in 1970 these three wore skirts barely covering their bottoms to a wedding. It wouldn't be considered either suitable or stylish now (was I the only one quietly indignant when Kate Moss wore hot pants to a friend's wedding?), but the more relaxed attitudes of the 1960s had made their mark and paved the way for yet more sartorial experimentation. A nurse's salary didn't allow for huge shopping expeditions but these girls were resourceful, borrowing each other's clothes, giving each other face masks and doing each other's hair, and occasionally even making their own clothes. My mum had a curvy body shape, and as the bikinis on the high street simply didn't cater to her measurements – at least not in a way she liked – she set about making her own, under-wiring and all. It was one way of avoiding the embarrassment of trying on swimwear, and the only way to ensure a perfect fit for the bottom and the top. A lady of many talents, my mum.

My dad travelled a lot (only narrowly escaping missing my sister's premature birth) with his job for the *Mirror*, often returning with pieces he had picked up along the way – a blue-and-white seersucker suit here, an orange-and-purple silk scarf there. On one occasion, when he went to New York accompanied by my mum, they bought me and my sister matching blue nightdresses from Bloomingdale's. You really couldn't tell whose excitement at their swag was bigger, ours or theirs. Dad loved New York and assured me I would do too. 'It's the one place in the world where it is exactly as you imagine it to be,' he told me, 'just as it is in the films.'

So often labelled 'the decade that style forgot', the 1970s that I arrived into was anything but. Photographs and films of this time show it to be alive with colour and expression, a happy time, assured enough to finally lay the sixties to rest.

This was a confident time in fashion history when actresses like Diane Keaton and Jane Fonda were breaking the very girly mould with their eclectic fashion choices. Woody Allen wrote *Annie Hall* specifically for Diane Keaton, who adopted her own very individual personal style for the title role. The bowler hat, waistcoat and tie, wide trousers and lace-up shoes ensemble assured the actress style-icon status, not an obvious label for a low-key comedy actress with a slightly awkward walk. At the opposite end of the scale, Jane Fonda had already

made a name for herself in the sixties with the release of the cult film *Barbarella*. Her skintight catsuit became the stuff of fashion legend and propelled her to stardom. Attention was focused not only on her acting talents but also on her wardrobe choices, and by the mid-seventies Fonda had won her first Oscar for the film *Klute* as well as a following of women copying her style of thigh high boots, polonecks and miniskirts.

It was an exciting time of change in British fashion with a shift away from the very relaxed vibe of the sixties. Clothes were exaggerated – jeans were more flared than ever, skirts and collars were longer, ties were wider. Simultaneously, late-nineteenth-century detailing like ruffles, flounces, lace and puffed sleeves started to appear and it was this aesthetic that put Laura Ashley, who had started out as a soft furnishings designer, firmly on the map. For almost a decade, long white cotton dresses and blouses evocative of nightwear sold like hot cakes. The Fulham branch of Laura Ashley sold 4,000 dresses in one week alone. The floor-length polka-dot dress and floppy hat my mum wore for my sister's christening was pure elegance, utterly impractical for a mother of a newborn running around after a toddler, but fabulous for that one day.

For those of us who grew up in the seventies, life was a series of hot hazy summers and snowy Christmases negotiated in striped skinny-ribbed polonecks and corduroy trousers. You buckled your roller skates over your T-bar

shoes and huge strawberry Mivvi ice lollies cost no more than 25p. We were outside on our bikes as much as we could, the only reason to be inside being to sleep, bathe or do homework – but who wanted to do any of those things? I was either dressed up folk-style as Laura Ingalls Wilder from *Little House on the Prairie* (the Laura Ingalls Wilder portrayed in the television series was someone lots of little girls were slightly obsessed with then) or in nothing but a sun hat and wellies, the easiest and most pull-on-able garments a small child can find. At home we had one television (it was white; Mum was rather taken aback when Dad came home with it) and were the last family I knew to get a video recorder. I lived for Friday mornings when my *Bunty* comic arrived along with the rest of the day's newspapers – and there were at least seven of them. Our paperboy lugged every single publication every single day to our house. He then squeezed each newspaper through the letterbox, which then landed with a loud thud onto the floor below. Eventually, my dad asked the newsagent if the paperboy could perhaps, to save time, leave the pile on the doormat outside.

Newsprint was highly transferable in those days and on the weekends when my dad took the papers back to bed with him and we all bundled in, the bed sheets would end up smeared with black. No wonder my mum invested in some teal-coloured bed linen – funky but practical. Dad's black fingerprints would also end up on all the light switches and door knobs and my poor mum

would follow his inky trail with a J-cloth. If you spent any time at all in our house it wasn't unusual to leave with a smudge of newspaper print on your nose. You might also be sent off with a copy of the *Daily Mirror* under your arm, Dad never missed an opportunity to spread his written word.

In 1974, just before my sister was born, my parents decided to move our little family of three from the rented flat above the junk shop in north London to leafy Kingston-upon-Thames, just to the south.

My parents decided to make the move from north to south London mainly because David and Jude had a house in Ham where they lived with their four children. Eventually, however, with Jude no longer acting, they made the move out of London and we would visit them at their beautiful home in Henley. My aunt Jude was not one to do anything by halves and we would arrive in Henley to find their house stuffed full of people of all ages. Many of them would invariably be theatre friends. I didn't give a second thought to the presence of Maggie Smith, Peter Hall and John Gielgud, they were simply older people with loud projecting voices. If I had known the pedigree I was surrounded by perhaps I would have thought twice about forcing them all to sit and watch my self-penned playlets of which I was more often than not the star. The theatrical tales, both overheard and told to me, along with the glamour of those weekends, helped to infect me with

the acting bug even though my aunt had taken a step back from acting right at the peak of her career.

To a small child, their house was like a fairy-tale castle and my imagination ran riot whenever we visited. I would happily explore the grounds for hours dressed as a cowgirl or occasionally Queen Elizabeth I. Aunt Jude appeared to have stolen costumes from every job she ever had. The enormous attic, which was home to two rocking horses among other things, had a vast walk-in wardrobe containing costumes from Cinderella to Captain Hook. It would be exciting for any little girl but for me it was heaven on earth.

It wasn't every Saturday my dad and I were left to our own devices but this particular Saturday was unusual. The evening before, just before opening time on 14 March 1975 and three weeks ahead of schedule, my new baby sister came into the world. I wasn't fazed by the sudden disappearance of my mum because having my dad left in charge meant fish and chips for supper and a far later bedtime. Then on Saturday morning we went shopping, just him and me. I was three years and six days old and I needed a new anorak. My dad took my hand and we walked into Kingston town centre to check out the anoraks in Bentalls. Later that day, one new navy-blue anorak with red floral trim purchased, we found the time to go to the hospital to meet Hannah, my new sibling.

The Bentalls department store of my childhood was not as it is today, conjoined to a big shopping mall and bordering a pedestrianised town centre. In 1975 there were no balloon sellers or musicians in Kingston town centre, no one selling the *Big Issue* and no McDonald's or Starbucks. Instead, a coffee break was likely to be taken in either the Bentalls or BHS cafes – soulless places filled with old ladies in hats sipping tea, nibbling Bourbon biscuits and *moaning* about Sainsbury's running out of syrup of figs. C&A was still around then. Traffic drove right down the high street making it a bit of a squeeze on the pavements on a Saturday (the one really big shopping day), and there were perhaps two car parks compared to the nine or ten there are now.

My mum was a nurse, slim, young and pretty, and naturally I wanted to be just like her. I couldn't wait until I was tall enough to be able to run up the stairs two at a time as she always did, to deftly reverse into a parking space with a strong quick twist of the steering wheel. Mum's biceps were well honed, probably due to lifting heavy patients in and out of bed, although it seemed to me it was more likely a direct result of the daily steering wheel workout. When Mum got ready for an evening out with my dad, I would lie on their bed watching her apply make-up and deciding what to wear, fascinated by those things that I would only have access to 'when you're grown up': high-heeled shoes (not so high in the seventies), colourful lipsticks and eye shadows, and long silky scarves. Mum didn't spend hours

getting ready – she didn't have the time – but she would leave the house looking effortlessly lovely. If I was ever sad to see her go, I don't remember it, but Mum being out of the house meant one thing: an uninterrupted opportunity to go through her wardrobe.

I did not realise it then but this was the start of my fascination with how we present ourselves to the world. Clothes are powerful, and while the psychology of fashion, or rather style, is inextricably linked to factors out of our control, such as the weather, where we are going and what we will be doing there, the clothes we choose speak volumes about how we perceive ourselves. Then there are our complicated thoughts and feelings which affect the way we move, act and communicate. By the time mood, body confidence, happiness and health have been added to the mix, it's no wonder that sometimes it can take so long to get dressed. And that's without trends and personal taste coming into it.

I loved that navy-blue anorak with the red trim and each time it was handed down to the next three-year-old in line, I thought of that shopping trip with my dad, me excitedly skipping back along the river and him making me laugh until I hiccupped at his duck impressions, the shiny green Bentalls bag swinging as we went.

Kingston's town centre was a cut above the sort of thing you found in most towns and people travelled a significant distance to shop there. We were fortunate in the

choice we had in Kingston. Even then, friends who lived outside Greater London could only dream of being able to shop at somewhere like Chelsea Girl. C&A, BHS and M&S were the standard destinations for kidswear, with the dreaded school shoes determinedly Clark's or Start-Rite. The little railway station, strangely old-fashioned for such a thriving town centre, groaned under the weight of the enthusiastic Saturday shoppers.

There were a wide variety of shoe shops such as Lilley and Skinner, Ravel, Dolcis, and Freeman, Hardy and Willis in addition to Bentalls department store, I grew up with a pretty good idea of which store sold what (swimwear at BHS, fabric at Bentalls, knickers from M&S, ski-wear at C&A) and went on regular shopping trips with my mum. My mum shopped in Hennes and so that was where I started too. Clothes shops for children were few and far between and the Hennes in Kingston stocked reasonably priced childrenswear.

According to my mum, from a very young age I made a beeline for anything bright and sparkly, sometimes adding items to the pram containing my sleeping sister, without Mum noticing. I wasn't immune to throwing a tantrum over a pair of wedge-heeled gold mules picked out of the bargain bin at Freeman, Hardy and Willis. Mum didn't stand any nonsense. 'When you're grown up you can buy as many silly shoes as you like but while I'm in charge and your feet are still growing, you will wear sensible shoes.' The same went for brushing my teeth and going to bed at

a reasonable hour. She knew best, and I was going to have to wait a very long time indeed before I would be allowed to ruin my feet, let my teeth rot and develop dark shadows under my eyes. How totally unreasonable!

Bentalls department store was a fairly sombre affair when I was a child. It seemed fusty and boring to me, and I couldn't understand why grown-ups wanted to spend what seemed like hours browsing through their racks of clothes. After I was caught shoplifting by my granny (two plastic rings that were way too big, she made me give them back), I had even less time for it. My mum once took me to have my hair cut there and it was so expensive she cut my hair herself from that moment on. The crooked fringes my sister and I sport in our prep school photographs are testament to this.

Meanwhile, in London the scene was set for a more approachable and affordable shopping experience, the like of which had never been seen before.

In the pre-AIDS world of the seventies, dressing up was fun and uninhibited and designers were taking risks. They were becoming personalities in their own right as they collaborated with the up-and-coming stars of the day. Ossie Clark (himself immortalised in David Hockney's famous painting *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*) invited Manolo Blahnik to design a shoe collection for his couture collection and Blahnik, who up until 1972 had focused only on designing men's shoes, consequently became the first man

to appear on the cover of British *Vogue*. Halston, Zandra Rhodes and Barbara Hulanicki were fast becoming influential in young fashion. My mum says that the department store Biba set up by Hulanicki on London's Kensington Church Street in 1966 was *the* shopping destination. By 1971 Biba had relocated the original shop to a far bigger site. Biba was seven floors of beautiful things, fabulous clothes at prices young people could afford. It hosted exhibitions, played loud music with occasional live bands and had communal changing rooms, something of a novelty back then.

Mum's friend Sue remembers buying a dark blue dress in the new 'midi' length. An actress in the West End, she hadn't bought the dress with anything specific in mind. 'It had a high neck and was made of a woolly jersey fabric with lamb chop sleeves which were very tight at the wrist.' Sue ended up wearing her Biba number with knee-high boots for her 1973 wedding to her husband Roger. Unfortunately, she no longer has the dress. 'Weirdly I don't have any photos, except for a head shot taken in the Baker Street tube station photo booth.' So effortlessly cool, so 1970s.

Jacquie, another family friend, not only has photos of her Biba purchases, she still has them safely stored away. She describes many pieces, but the one that stands out is a pair of lime green bell-bottoms. 'I wore them with a cropped top that showed my midriff and a matching headband. I used to take my three daughters [all under five] to the playground dressed like that.'

Jacquie talks about all manner of fabulous-sounding garments she bought at Biba: kaftans, suede trousersuits and platform sandals. Does she remember what the customer service was like at Biba, did the staff help her to pick out stuff? ‘Oh no!’ Jacquie laughs. ‘The staff didn’t help you, it was more like a bazaar, you picked out your own bits and pieces.’

The interior of Biba was like an ocean liner with its sumptuous décor taking inspiration from the Art Deco period. Yet another nursing friend of my mum’s, Mary, frequented Biba in a professional capacity where she was employed to look after customers’ children while they shopped, one of whom was Barbara Hulanicki’s own baby. Your own personal in-store nursery nurse – how very ahead of the game.

Customers headed to Biba to buy something they had spotted on the telly that week, more often than not on the *Ready Steady Go!* presenter Cathy McGowan. McGowan was catapulted to fame when she stumbled into the job of presenter on the Friday night show, which had the slogan ‘The weekend starts here’. She was introduced to the Biba designs during a double-page shoot for *Honey* magazine and continued to wear it regularly on the show, which played host to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. McGowan even collaborated on a collection for Biba.

If Top Shop’s flagship store in Oxford Circus is representative of a young brash London today, then in the early seventies Biba marked the turning of the tide in fashion

retail with everyone from Julie Christie to Twiggy wearing the label. Sadly, however, by 1975 after a disagreement with the board about creative control, Barbara Hulanicki left the company and not long after Biba's doors closed for the final time.

By the late seventies I had started at my all girls' school in Wimbledon and I had a definite idea of how I wanted to be dressed. We weren't as obsessed with pink as little girls seem to be nowadays, but I did look longingly at bikes that had pastel-coloured ribbons hanging off the handlebars. My dad scoffed at such frivolity; he wouldn't allow stabilisers either. While Dad was usually happy to listen to an argument rather than dismissing it out of hand, he resolutely put his foot down over stabilisers.

My increasing girlyness was perhaps a reaction to the tomboyish outfits that found their way into my wardrobe. There were a lot of boy cousins in our extended family and we had been handed down many of their clothes. My dad's older sister Judith had impeccable taste and dressed her children in beautiful clothes. Breton tops and the softest sweaters bearing French labels were kept carefully in a drawer until I was big enough to wear them. My mum marvelled at the expensive fabrics and the superior quality, but it was lost on me. Even the immaculate cowboy-style tan suede jacket owned by Maggie Smith's younger son Toby Stephens (best known as the Bond villain in *Die Another Day*) ended up in our house. It was

when faced with a classroom full of little girls with pony-tails that I realised I'd outgrown my cousins' jeans and T-shirts. I didn't want to be mistaken for a boy with my short hair and swimming trunks any more. The fantastic cowboy jacket remained unworn and was handed back to Toby Stephens for his own young children.

My mum bought or made my clothes from then on, but where my sister Hannah didn't care what she wore as long as it wasn't itchy, I wasn't so easy to please. I preferred to shop with my mum and, unusually for a child, I enjoyed it – as long as we weren't shopping for school shoes, which reduced me to tears every time. Luckily my mum had good taste and was pretty handy with a sewing machine. When, in the early hours of Christmas Day 1978, my baby brother arrived, both my sister Hannah and I went to visit him in Kingston hospital in long party dresses with pinafores (very *Downton Abbey*) made entirely by my mum. I had my new Abba annual with me, a gift from a favourite babysitter, and my dad brought along his newly purchased Polaroid camera so he could take some instant photos. That was the seventies I remember – cool, exciting, the start of everything.