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SAIL AWAY

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SAIL AWAY

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The Happy Hooper
Not Quite Nice
Nice Work (If You Can Get It)

SAIL AWAY

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PART ONE

Catalysts

SUZY MARSHALL's phone rang.

It was her agent, Max. 'Interview, darling!'

Suzy sat down and took a deep breath. She'd not had a whisper of work now for months. She grabbed a pencil and notepad, ready to take down the details.

After twenty or more years working steadily in rep and TV, when Suzy hit her forties the job offers had started to dry up. Now that she had just turned sixty, even getting an audition seemed like a rare miracle.

Over the last few years Suzy, like most older actresses, had acted intermittently, and in between 'real' work, to make ends meet, she had taken small secretarial temp jobs.

Her savings had dwindled away. In fact, she had been unemployed for so many months now, she was no longer eligible to collect dole money, and at her age she was also put at the back of the line for the little jobs she had always depended on to fill the out-of-work days.

The last time she had turned up at the job centre, the man behind the counter laughed in her face.

'You're a pensioner,' he said. 'No one is going to employ a pensioner.'

Suzy had explained that even though she was just sixty she was not entitled to collect a pension for some years to come.

'Not my problem,' said the young man, slicking back his greasy hair.

'What am I going to live on? I'm broke. It's not fair.'

‘That’s life,’ said the young man. ‘Life’s not fair, Ms Marshall. In another existence, I could have been a rich, sexy male model; instead I’m a clerk in a job centre.’

Suzy had no reply to this.

It was hard to believe now, but Suzy had once known a tempest of fame. For a good ten years, she had spent most of her train journeys and visits to the supermarket signing autographs for enthusiastic fans. She had played the principal role in the multi-award-winning mid-1980s TV drama series *Dablías*, a show which had a regular audience of twenty million Brits who eagerly awaited Thursday evening’s transmission. But, although at the time *Dablías* had been a worldwide hit, now, more than thirty years later, everyone had forgotten both the series and Suzy.

From a professional point of view, it was no help either, for when *Dablías* had been top of the TV ratings, the new wave of directors had not yet been born, so that *Dablías* was now no more than a word printed on her CV.

‘The interview is tomorrow at 10 a.m.,’ said Max down the line.

Suzy wrote ‘10’.

‘It’s for two and a half weeks’ rehearsal and a six-week run of *The Importance of Being Earnest*,’ said Max.

Excited now, Suzy wrote the name of the classic play.

‘You’ll be reading for the role of ...’

Suzy knew it would have to be Miss Prism ...

‘Lady Bracknell.’

Suzy’s heart flipped with joy. Lady Bracknell was one of the best classic roles of all time.

While Max went on reading out the list of scene numbers that she would have to familiarise herself with, Suzy wondered where the production would be. She hoped it might be one of the larger reps in a big city like Liverpool, Leeds, Nottingham or Birmingham. Even a small theatre might be fun – a couple of months in a cottage in Wales or up in the wilds of Scotland would be a great adventure.

‘The engagement is with the grandly named Zurich Regal International Theatre,’ said Max. ‘But rehearsals will be in London.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Suzy. ‘Zurich in Switzerland?’

‘That’s right, darling. One of the English-speaking theatre companies.’

Suzy’s mood dipped. She knew that these little European troupes paid badly and had a very low, if not negative, value on the CV.

They played to tiny audiences consisting mainly of expats. No one back in England heard a squeak about the shows put on, which failed even to get a review in the *Stage*, a newspaper which reviewed every play, musical, pantomime and end-of-the-pier show from Land’s End to John o’Groats.

The result was that, although an actor might be slogging away for weeks on end, as far as all the casting directors went, they might as well be dead.

In reality, to Suzy, an eight-week stint with the Zurich Regal International Theatre was another slide down the ladder (or in this case was it the snake?) of success.

But it was a great role, and it was at least a *little* money. And it would be a lot more fun to spend her time with other actors, keeping busy, rather than sitting at home alone gazing at the TV, waiting for the phone to ring.

Max gave Suzy the address of the audition.

‘N13?’ she asked. ‘Where’s that?’

‘Palmer’s Green,’ said Max. ‘I believe it’s the director’s home.’ He laughed. ‘So, you can get to bellow out your “*handbag*” in his kitchen. Hope the neighbours don’t mind.’

‘Who is the director?’ asked Suzy, hoping it might be someone she had worked with in her past.

‘Reg Shoemith. He does a lot of these sort of things – Hamburg, Vienna, Nairobi. Anyway, rehearsals start on Monday.’

Suzy finished the call with mixed feelings.

In the mirror she inspected the roots of her blonde hair. She had worn it in a Mary Quant page-boy style for probably over fifteen years now, she realised. She had kept her figure, and at five foot seven and a half inches, did she dare to admit she would make an imposing Lady B? Why not?

She had been in the game long enough to realise that she must be being seen for a last-minute replacement for the part. No sane person would keep the casting of Lady Bracknell back until a few days before rehearsals started. It would have been one of the first roles cast.

Therefore, the company was clearly desperate.

Suzy had never heard of either the theatre company or the director. But, looking on the positive side, she was really in with a chance. A company of such low prestige, which could only afford to hold auditions in the kitchen of the director's home in Palmers Green, should be so lucky to have an actress with such a strong CV auditioning for them!

They'd be mad not to have her.

The job would be a shoo-in.

Early next morning Suzy eagerly got on the Tube and made her way to the address in Palmers Green. For the whole journey she studied the play, familiarising herself with the lines, ready to deliver them with gusto.

But, once she was sitting in the director's living room, she realised that even this job was not yet in the bag. Far from it. She wished she wasn't lumbered with her rather cumbersome pink National Health reading glasses, but maybe she would use them to disdainful advantage when she was called in for her turn. Suzy recognised at least three of the other women sitting on the two sofas, swotting their scripts, silently mouthing the words. She surreptitiously studied them. They were all actresses, like herself, who had once been household names. One had spent years as the leading lady at the Royal Shakespeare Company, another played many major roles in every TV drama you could think

of, while the other had even been nominated twenty years ago for a BAFTA (or was it an Oscar?) for a supporting role in a British film.

She hoped the others might be up for the part of Miss Prism, but no. Everyone was competing for the same role – Lady Bracknell in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

It was therefore a great surprise when, next morning, Saturday, Max phoned and told Suzy she’d got the job.

Rehearsals were to take place in a smelly church hall near Tottenham Cemetery. For Suzy this meant a little under two hours’ travel at the beginning and end of each day. And, as actors tend to like arriving good and early, it meant that each morning Suzy had to be out of her front door at 7.30 a.m. sharp and she would be lucky if she was home by 9 p.m. But the journey, by Tube, train and bus, would give her time to fill in the wad of forms which always came with jobs away from home – tax information, passport numbers, bank account details – and also to look over her lines. Learning lines was much harder these days, and she certainly didn’t want to be the last actor off the book.

She flopped on to the sofa and pulled her copy of *The Comedies of Oscar Wilde* from the bookshelf. As she flicked through the pages she thought back on her life.

Talk about starting at the top and working her way down that thing which the general public laughingly called ‘the ladder of success’!

But here she was, still working. Not only that, she was going to a beautiful foreign city, to play one of the great roles in world drama with a group of actors. What was wrong with that? Far better than sitting in some suburban sitting room looking after noisy grandchildren, working for a pittance with all the part-time pensioners in B&Q, or commuting in from the suburbs each day to answer the phone in a call centre. Suzy knew that, although she could do that kind of thing now and then, for her, as a lifestyle choice, it would drive her

to madness. As it was, bad luck and a succession of affairs with men who went off and married other people meant that she had no children and therefore also no grandchildren of her own. She lived alone, and, truthfully, was content with that. She detested the very thought of all those little domestic spats with the beloved other about who was in control of the TV and what they ate for dinner, or where they should go on holiday and when.

She had done the 'living together' thing a few times. But it had never really worked for her. In her own experience, once domesticity took a grip, romance went right out the window. Suzy was free, and, if she searched her soul, she had to admit that, deep down, she was happy. She was a born gypsy. She loved the never knowing where you'd be next week, and all the related unpredictability of the actor's life. She also enjoyed the camaraderie of other actors, who, though they could be catty, were rarely boring company.

Suzy kicked off her shoes, put her feet up and turned to Lady B's first scene.

"You can take a seat, Mr Worthing," she read.

*

"You can take a seat, Mr Worthing."

"Thank you, Lady Bracknell. I prefer standing."

Two days into rehearsal and Suzy was about to block Lady Bracknell's famous 'handbag' scene.

She sat in the centre of the dusty rehearsal room, prop notebook and pencil poised, facing Jason Scott, a dark-haired boy with bright eyes and a glittering smile, who took the part of Jack Worthing.

'We'll stop there for the moment,' snapped Reg Shoesmith, the director, rising from his seat behind the stage manager's table and moving into the acting space. 'Time for lunch.'

Neither Suzy nor Jason could believe that a director would stop at this point in the script. But he was the director, so it was his call.

Suzy swapped a look with Barbara, the stage manager who sat at Reg's side. Barbara, a shrewd blonde woman who didn't speak much, had a very sharp way of expressing herself with almost imperceptible movements of the face. She rolled her eyes, and closed her script. It was clear she was in agreement with the actors on this.

'Half an hour, everyone,' Barbara called to the assembled company. 'Ready to pick up where we left off.'

Suzy took her bag of home-made sandwiches and went to sit out in the winter sunshine. The only green space nearby was the cemetery, so she found a bench between the grave-stones, and ate her lunch while thinking through the one and a half days they had done.

Although Lady Bracknell was a role Suzy had longed to play all her life, now that she was having a go it didn't seem quite as much fun as she had hoped.

She realised that getting a decent performance together was going to be quite a challenge in the mere two and a half weeks' rehearsal period. She was also frightened about the proposed single day set aside for the technical and dress rehearsal at the venue, before opening the same night in Zurich's Little Regal Theatre. It would be a real sprint, especially as Reg was messing around with the play in a way that would need a lot of technical work – with lighting, sound, and quick costume changes.

Suzy tried with all her might to give the director, Reg, the benefit of the doubt, but so far she found it hard to agree with anything he proposed.

'The play,' Reg had pronounced after yesterday's read-through, 'is a tiny bit creaky.' Nonetheless, he informed them all, he had some ideas which would 'freshen it up a bit'. The first of these ideas was that, between every act, the actors

playing Algernon, Jack and the butlers, Lane and Merriman, should sing little ditties which Reg had written himself. They would all wear boaters and harmonise in the barbershop style, popping up and down from behind the furniture while they and the other actors put the tables and chairs into place to change the scene.

Reg's other 'fresh' ideas were equally grim. He had told Emily that Miss Prism would make her first entrance riding a bicycle on to the tiny stage, and, despite words in the text clearly indicating something quite formal, he expected Cecily and Gwendolen, during the famous cucumber sandwiches scene, to toast marshmallows over a barbecue he had positioned in the centre of a Japanese-style patio garden.

Suzy liked the rest of the cast enormously.

The young quartet – Jack, Algernon, Gwendolen and Cecily – were fresh-faced, keen and charming, excited to be playing their parts and looking forward to exploring Zurich. Jason Scott was exceptionally good in the role of Jack Worthing and his alter ego Earnest. Luckily enough, most of Suzy's time onstage was with him.

Lady Bracknell's daughter Gwendolen was played by India, a sharp-witted, well-heeled young lady with a nice line in tart remarks.

Suzy liked Emily, the actress playing Miss Prism, too. She was quiet but every now and then said something really droll. Suzy wondered what Emily was secretly making of the director's 'artistic vision'.

The only member of the cast who Suzy hadn't taken to was Stan Arbuthnot – the man who was playing Canon Chasuble. On only two days' experience, she already knew that he was a pompous bore, always sounding off about his escapades with famous actors, and delivering unfunny quips about everyone else's performance, going into sulks when he didn't get his own way. He also had an annoying habit of making remarks under his breath during other people's scenes. Suzy had not

worked out whether he was going through his own lines, or making comments on the actors who were trying to work a few feet away. Whenever she was up in the acting space Suzy felt certain that Stan's mumbling was a running commentary on how bad she was.

But Stan/Chasuble was rarely onstage with Lady Bracknell. He stayed in the rehearsal room during lunch, sitting in the corner sucking up to Reg, while gorging on cold greasy bacon sandwiches which he had made at home that morning.

Suzy had been revolted when, during Monday's rehearsal, Stan had returned to the acting area after lunch with greasy shiny patches on his cheeks and little flecks of chewed-up sandwich on his double chin. She thanked her lucky stars that Lady Bracknell never had to go anywhere near Chasuble. She really pitied Emily, who had to have an onstage kiss with him, albeit a peck on the cheek.

Due to the short rehearsal period, lunch break was unusually only thirty minutes long.

Suzy made her way back to the rehearsal room. She grabbed her props – the notebook and a piece of stick representing her parasol – and took her place in the centre of the room, with Jason standing opposite her.

“You can take a seat, Mr Worthing.”

“Thank you, Lady Bracknell. I prefer standing.”

‘Stop!’ Reg advanced from the director's desk, rubbing his hands together with glee, the rosacea on his cheeks flaring, saying, ‘We don't want any of that dusty old Dame Edith Evans stuff. Nor any of that subdued Dame Judi Dench version. This is a vibrant, living production, Suzy. Relevant. Hip. So, I'll let you into the secret now. When it comes to the iconic “handbag” bit I'm going to give it a modern twist.’

Suzy swallowed hard and reminded herself that they were opening in Zurich and consequently no one she knew was likely ever actually to *see* the show.

She really had to keep it stored away as a case of ‘take the money and run’.

Reg eyed Jason then spun around and faced Suzy, his finger pointing towards her. He pursed his lips, raised his eyebrows and put on the face which he obviously thought made him look cute and naughty.

Suzy prepared for the worst.

Reg bent low and whispered in Suzy’s ear. ‘This is going to be soooo fabulous!’ His breath smelled rank with tooth decay.

‘Everyone’s going to expect you to do an enormous swoopy *baaaaandbaaaag* thing,’ he gave a pantomime rendition of Edith Evans’s voice. ‘Either that or they’ll think you’ll toss it away with the low-key-racing-through-it-as-if-it-didn’t-matter thing. Sooooo ...’ He lowered his voice and said the words she feared most: ‘I’ve had a brilliant idea.’

Suzy took a deep breath.

‘I’m going to use the barbershop boys. They’re going to do a kind of sliding-scale wah-wah-wah thing, after you deliver the line.’

Blinking, Suzy scrutinised the director’s face to make sure he wasn’t joking.

He wasn’t.

‘They’re going to pop out from the wings, fluttering their boaters, and sing!’ He turned to face Jason. ‘Great idea, don’t you think?’

‘Ummm,’ said Jason, his voice only a tad above a whisper. ‘Yeah?’

Suzy didn’t want to be difficult, but ... well ... It was all right for these directors. They made these horrible errors of taste, and then, after the first night, they bugged off, never to be seen again. Meanwhile *you* were the one up there nightly onstage suffering the embarrassment, and the audiences’ reactions. Not only that but the newspaper reviewers always plonked the director’s awful ideas at the actor’s door, making

you look like a complete fool all over the press, and also, in these days of social media, all over Twitter and Facebook too.

She tapped her stick twice on the floor and said, 'Right ho! Let's get on with it then!'

However, by the end of the afternoon's rehearsal, Suzy could hold herself back no more and there was a heated stand-off. Jason took Suzy's side, but at that point Reg simply threw down the book and stormed out of the rehearsal room.

'Go home, both of you! Amateurs!' he yelled over his shoulder. 'I spent the whole of our precious half-hour lunchtime on the phone with the Swiss money man, so I've had quite enough of poncey prima donnas for one day, thank you. I'd like to work through the tea-party and the Chasuble/Prism scenes in fifteen minutes, if that's acceptable to the rest of the cast.'

Suzy and Jason rolled eyes at one another and silently gathered their things.

'We'll dodge round it,' Jason murmured, holding the door for her. 'Don't forget that, once we open, Reg will be back off to London. Then we can get together, change things and make it all work, our way.'

He winked. Suzy smiled back, feeling like a dangerous conspirator.

On the Tube home they decided to spend the rest of the afternoon going through their scenes in Suzy's flat.

Next morning, when they both arrived in the rehearsal room, Reg ignored them.

He was directing the opening scene of Act Two. This time Reg was picking on Emily. Stan Arbuthnot had had an idea about how he wanted to say a particular line, but this entailed Emily having to change the way she said her preceding line. Emily politely pointed out to Stan that acting was about listening to the other actor and replying, not planning gags on your own, which, to make them work, necessitated everyone else changing what they were doing.

'Just do it,' hissed Stan, spraying Emily with crummy spit.

‘No,’ replied Emily firmly, turning her back on him.

Stan sat down on the central banquette, folded his arms and squealed like a stuck pig. ‘No! No! I will not give in!’ He pattered his feet, as he sat, still shrieking in a high-pitched wail.

Suzy and Jason, sitting at the end of the rehearsal room, exchanged a look.

‘Good lord, what a hellish noise,’ whispered Suzy. ‘It goes right through your bones.’

‘It’s like watching a four-year-old having a tantrum over broccoli,’ Jason murmured. ‘He really is the end.’

‘I will not move or shut up until I am satisfied.’ Stan’s piercing scream was enough to shatter glass.

Reg moved on to the floor and addressed Emily. ‘Just deliver the line the way Stan wants you to,’ he said.

‘Seriously?’ Emily’s lips tightened and her eyes flared. ‘Fine. Whatever you like, Reg.’ She shrugged her shoulders. ‘You’re the director.’ Emily implied a slight query at the end of that sentence, as it was clear who was really in charge of the situation.

Reg nodded at Stan and he unfolded his arms and stood up, a grin spreading across his fat, glistening face.

Emily said the line. It sounded bizarre, and made her seem like an amateur actress. But Stan then made his well-practised reply, complete with eye-roll and tongue in cheek.

Suzy sighed, appalled to see something so cheap and end-of-the-pier in a play by Oscar Wilde, but then she remembered the use of the barbershop boys and realised that the whole show stank.

After the rehearsal for her scene ended Emily came across and sat next to Suzy.

‘Poor you,’ whispered Suzy.

Emily shrugged. ‘I’ve worked with Stan before. When he doesn’t get what he wants he turns into a real Violet Elizabeth Bott – you remember that temperamental girl in the *Just William* books. He throws a tantrum, complete with stamping

feet, yelling in that really unpleasant tone until the other party gives in. It's very tiresome.'

'Why would Reg support behaviour like that?' asked Suzy.

'It's easier to give in to him!' She laughed. 'He will go on making that row until you agree to his whim of the moment. Honestly, it's just simpler to get it over and done with, give him what he wants and shut him up.'

'How pathetic. He must have been a very spoiled child.'

'He still is,' said Emily. 'But for us life goes on.'

Suzy was in awe of Emily's fortitude. 'I think it's really sad that such horrible conduct gets rewarded.'

By the end of the second week, when the company hit run-throughs, Suzy was crossing her fingers and toes, but ostensibly going along with everything Reg said. All the while Jason kept giving her surreptitious winks. Suzy winked back, gritted her teeth and smiled in Reg's direction.

She was not happy with herself, however. She was still grasping about for her lines. It didn't help to question matters in a production when you weren't confidently off the book. It was hard stuff to learn too. The major problem with Wilde is that the text simply couldn't take a paraphrase. One word out of place and the whole thing collapsed. The learning had to be precise. The words weren't going in and she knew part of that was because she was uncomfortable playing the role the way it had been directed.

On the last evening's rehearsal before their departure for Switzerland, Suzy was in an utter panic.

After taking a short tea-break, Reg announced that the final run-through was to have a small audience – not only the usual technical people like the lighting designer and stage management team, but also the backer and some of the director's friends. The Swiss backer, Reg told them, was new to theatre. He'd admitted to Reg that he'd never seen a play before. But he was rich, and had money to burn. Luckily the

man had no idea how it all worked, Reg added, which in the long run he said could only be good for the company.

During the first act Suzy dried about four times and, at one point, even had the embarrassing moment of asking Barbara if she could look at the book before they continued.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Jason in the interval break as he swigged from a sports water bottle. ‘You’ll be marvellous, Suze. Honestly, just stop worrying. It’s a rubbish concept, but you’re better than it.’

She felt tears prickle in her eye.

Jason put his arm around her shoulder.

‘I’m not kidding,’ he whispered. ‘Head up, darling. You’ll be great.’

‘Jason! Suzy!’ Reg shouted. ‘Come here please.’ He summoned them away in the direction of the gaggle of people at the other end of the room who were standing around whispering and sipping wine from plastic cups. ‘Our principal backer wants to meet you.’

As she got closer she saw the man make a face and gesture which caused Reg to hold up his hand and say, ‘Sorry, Suzy. Only Jason required.’

For a moment, Suzy felt really upset that the backer had appeared rather keen *not* to meet her. She got back to the row of chairs at the acting end of the room and dived into her script.

‘Don’t worry about that lot.’ Emily patted her on the back. ‘I’ve been in these European things before. That lot know nothing. They may have money but they’re all “Am-Dram” experts, and feel quite free to shower you with reminiscences of how wonderful they were when they played the part with Scunthorpe Amateur Operatic Society in the eighties.’

Suzy laughed.

‘I gather you’ve done these shows before.’

Emily nodded.

‘What are the audiences like over there?’

‘Much the same as the backers. They clap and cheer, then, at the mingle afterwards, zoom in on you to tell you how much better they were when they did it.’ Emily stooped to retie her lace-up boot. ‘And they’re as old as we are. I remember you in *Dablias*, darling. That was a very good show, and you were wonderful in it.’ She leaned against the wall while she adjusted her petticoats. ‘Chin up! Don’t forget that the money people, especially small-scale ones like these, rarely have good taste in the arts. I’ll bet you Mr Moneybags has only asked to see Jason because he fancies him.’

Suzy glanced across the rehearsal room and realised that Emily had hit it. The backer, a sleek-looking man in a very expensive suit, looked as though he had lewd designs on poor Jason.

‘To be frank, when they offered me the job I was dreading it,’ added Emily, ‘but when I heard I’d be working with you I was rather excited! They told me the local people in Zurich went wild when they heard you were coming out to join the cast. Didn’t Reg tell you that?’

Barbara, the stage manager, called the company to stand by and the second half started.

Suzy was puzzled. Reg had certainly not told her that. In fact, from the audition onwards, Reg really hadn’t had a nice word to say to her.

But it was good to know that she had fans over in Switzerland.

For the second half of the play, Suzy was fine with her lines, and really enjoyed the rest of the run-through.

Afterwards, the actors gathered in the pub down the road from the rehearsal room to grab one last drink before leaving to pack for their flights the next day. As they compared notes they realised that, presumably in another ploy to save money, the producer had booked them on different flights with multiple airlines, all departing at different times.

‘I don’t think I’ve been given a ticket,’ said Emily, panicked.

‘Didn’t you open your emails?’ India, the young girl playing Gwendolen, held up a plane ticket. ‘You had to click on the link, Emily. That takes you to the ticket. I printed mine out right away. Even though it’s all here on my phone. Look!’ India held up her mobile, displaying the flight ticket, with its QR-code square box. ‘Give me your phone, Emily.’

Emily handed it over and let India click away.

‘I printed mine out last night.’ Suzy rooted about in her handbag and pulled out her ticket. ‘We leave Heathrow at noon.’

‘Not me,’ said India. ‘I go from City Airport at 2 p.m. What’s going on?’

‘This is no fun,’ said the boy playing Algernon. ‘I go from Luton at eleven fifty. What time is your flight, Jason?’

Jason shrugged and pulled out a slip of paper. ‘And I’ve already checked in for my 10 a.m. flight from Gatwick.’

‘Why have they done this?’ asked Suzy. ‘Whenever I’ve toured before the whole company always flew together.’

‘Someone needed to keep us apart!’ Jason laughed. ‘We obviously have way too much fun when we’re together.’

‘Googled the last available seats, I should think,’ said India. ‘You can always get ridiculously cheap last-minute offers.’ She handed Emily back the phone, displaying her ticket. ‘There you are, Emily. You’re also from City Airport. And I’ve checked you in.’

Suzy wondered what would have happened if there had been a massive rush for tickets to Zurich tomorrow – for a football match or something – and some of the cast couldn’t get there. What would the company have done then? Would they have opened the show a day later, or simply missed out the dress rehearsal and expected the actors to get on with it?

‘Wait a minute,’ said India, displaying her ticket again. ‘Are your tickets like mine? Exchangeable and refundable? I thought they cost more!’

Everyone took their tickets out and inspected them.

'Mine is too,' said Emily. 'Well, I suppose they think we're worth it.'

'Or they're hoping to extend the run?' suggested India. 'In case we're a wild success.'

'To us! And a bloody good show!' Jason stood up and raised his glass.

'Will we have supper together when we get there, on our last free evening?' asked Emily.

'I think I'd better bow out of that,' said Suzy. 'I'm still feeling a little shaky on my lines.'

'You're fine on your lines, Suzy,' said Jason. 'Not to mention "I hate people who are not serious about mealtimes ..."'

Everyone at the table finished the line: "It is so shallow of them!"

'That's decided then.' Jason finished his drink. 'We'll all meet at the Café Odeon down by the lake in Zurich, tomorrow night at 6 p.m. Deal?' He burst into one of his radiant grins. 'Come on, folks. Whatever happens, let's have fun out there.'

Suzy drained her glass and realised that she felt more excited and energised than she had for years.

'Viva tomorrow!' she cried. 'Viva us!'