

# When I Grow Up

In many ways, the twenty-fifth of October was an ordinary day, which means it started with a fight with my mother and carried on from there.

The fight with my mother was because there wasn't any milk for the tea. As per usual, this was my fault. Nothing was ever Hilary's fault. God knows what she did before she had me to blame for everything. Because of the fight, I was late for school again. Mr Cox, my tutor, gave me a detention. I tried to reason with him.

"But it's my birthday," I said. "You can't give me a detention on my birthday. That's Fascism."

"No it isn't," said Mr Cox. "It's frustration. But you can do the detention on Monday." He gave me his cheesy, I'm-your-friend smile. "Happy Birthday."

After that I got told off for talking in geography. Then I got told off for talking in maths. Then I got told off for not having my homework

in history. Then I got told off for not having my homework in English. And, finally, I got told off by the headteacher for talking back to my geography teacher. All systems normal.

I never let that stuff bother me too much, though. I mean, it was life, wasn't it? I knew what preachers (teachers and parents) were like. I couldn't remember a time when I didn't hate my mother, except maybe when I was really little and didn't know any better. And school was never my thing, either. My best lesson at school was lunch. I was really good at lunch. I was enthusiastic, paid attention, tried hard and never gave the dinner ladies any lip. If they'd given out marks for lunch, I would've been top of the class. But my standards weren't as high in my other subjects. In my other subjects I was bottom of the class, unless I'd been sent to the headteacher and wasn't actually *in* the class. No one ever asked me what I'd got in a test unless they'd done really badly and wanted to find someone who had done worse.

Even if I had let that stuff bother me, though, it wouldn't have bothered me that day. It wasn't just my birthday. It was my fifteenth birthday! One more year down!

All I'd ever wanted to be was grown up. Then nobody could boss me around and I could do what I pleased. The age I really wanted to be was sixteen, of course, when you can legally do things without getting someone's permission, but fifteen was pretty close. Adulthood was shining like a

beacon in front of me only twelve months away.

I usually walked home from school with my best friend, Shanee, but since Shanee was away and it was my birthday *and* raining I took the bus. I sat right at the back in the corner, where no old lady would hit me with her shopping or glare at me to give up my seat. I put my headphones on and stared out the window. I didn't care what the other passengers thought, I sang along with my Discman all the way home. I was that happy.

Listening to my Discman and watching the street from the bus was one of my favourite pastimes. It was like a film. You know, like the bits between the talking when there's just music and people doing stuff. Sometimes *I* was in the film, and sometimes I was just watching it, making up stories about the people I saw.

Today, since it was my birthday, I was in the film.

The camera watched me watching the shoppers hurrying through the rain. I had Garbage on my Discman.

"When I Grow Up" was my favourite song.

There were tons of women with plastic-covered pushchairs in the street. They looked like they were pushing bubbles filled with babies. The bus stopped in front of McDonald's. There were more women with pushchairs sitting together in the window, talking and laughing while their children mashed up chips and played with the toy of the week.

The camera came in close on my face as I watched

them and stayed on me as I imagined myself sitting with the women in McDonald's, a shopping list in my pocket, joking about my husband, knowing exactly what I had to do for the rest of my life.

I got so involved in thinking about what kind of pushchair I would buy for my kid that I missed my stop. I got out at the next one and walked back.

If I really was in a film, when I got home the flat would've been filled with balloons and everybody would've been there, wearing party hats and hiding behind the sofa to surprise me. But I wasn't in a film. At least not that one. The flat was empty: no party and no balloons. I'd already opened all my presents and cards and my mother wouldn't be back from work for a couple of hours. This was fine with me. All she ever did was yell and nag. You'd think she was permanently suffering from PMT the way she carried on.

Anyway, I didn't care that there was no one there because I needed extra time to get ready. My mum and her boyfriend, Charley, were taking me to Planet Hollywood for dinner. This was a big deal, since Hilary and Charley's normal idea of splashing out was to eat at Pizza Hut, damn the expense.

I'd wanted to go to Planet Hollywood since it opened. I reckoned you never knew who you'd bump into in a place like that. The brainboxes at school all wanted to go to university and become professors or solicitors and stuff like that, but I wanted to get married and have my own flat and

lots of children. That was my true ambition. As far as I was concerned, having a family was the outfit you wore in life and everything else – jobs and stuff – were just the accessories. I even went through a phase when I was younger of designing my dream home and family with pictures from magazines. I bought dozens of cheap photo albums and filled them up with pictures of houses and husbands and children. They were all still under my bed.

But I wasn't stupid. I knew that before I could get married, I had to have a boyfriend. A *real* boyfriend. I modelled myself on the Alicia Silverstone character in *Clueless*: I didn't go out with schoolboys. Schoolboys were pimply and immature. They played air guitars and had food fights that made them gasp with laughter and disgusted everyone else. But having a rule about not going out with schoolboys meant I lost out. So far I hadn't really gone out with anyone.

That's why I was pretty excited about Planet Hollywood. It was the kind of place where I might meet someone I *could* go out with. I knew from films that it was when you went somewhere you didn't usually go that your life could change. And I definitely wanted my life to change.

I threw my wet clothes over the radiator and put on the stereo. My mother was still recovering from the break-up of Genesis. She thought the music I liked should be played just below a whisper and several miles away. So since she wasn't there to complain, I put it on really loud. Mrs Mugurdy

upstairs immediately started pounding on the ceiling, but, as per usual, I pretended I didn't hear her.

I was really looking forward to my bath. I wanted to have a long soak and shave my legs and stuff like that in peace and quiet. Which was something I couldn't do when the old bag was home. She'd be banging on the bathroom door all the time, shrieking at me to hurry up, didn't I know that other people needed to use the loo, too?

I put the kettle on and went to run the water. It took me a while to go through all my oil balls and bubbles, choosing just the right one for the occasion. Normally I used Raspberry Ripple from the Body Shop, but tonight was special. Like the kid in the Garbage song, I was going to turn every table I could get my hands on.

I wanted something grown-up and sexy, so if someone interesting *was* at Planet Hollywood, he'd be sure to notice me. I finally decided on White Musk. I read that White Musk was Sharon Stone's favourite. I reckoned if it was good enough for Sharon Stone, it was good enough for me.

The automatic switch on the kettle didn't work, of course, so it was nearly dry by the time I remembered that I'd left it on.

"Thank you, God," I said to the ceiling as I refilled it. If I burned out one more kettle my mother would kill me.

While the second kettle was boiling, I lit some candles and incense (to help me relax), and picked

out a CD to play while I was in the bath. My nan sent me a voucher for Tower Records for my birthday. My nan loves music. She stopped listening to anything new in about 1948, but she was in favour of it as a general principle. I got two new CDs with her token: the soundtrack to *Titanic* and the soundtrack to *The Bodyguard*. I put on *Titanic*. *Titanic* was my favourite film that year.

I lay in the bath with the light out and the candles flickering, and forgot about school and my mother and my dreary, boring life. I rewrote *Titanic* in my head. Instead of Jack dying in the sea and Rose ending up as an old lady who could hardly walk, they both drifted off on a door and ended up on a deserted island. The water was blue-green and palm trees swayed in a gentle breeze. We ate coconuts and bananas and Jack caught fish with his bare hands. It was paradise. Just the two of us, with no one else to push us around. I closed my eyes and I was making love to Jack on the white sand in the moonlight. Since I'd never been out with anyone, I'd never actually made love, of course, but I'd seen enough films to get the general idea. His kisses were electric. He looked down at me in the cool white shine of the moon. My body glistened with sand.

"You don't need jewels, Rose," Jack whispered. "You're beautiful as you are..."

The moist, full lips, soft as cotton balls moved towards mine.

A sudden furious banging on the bathroom door

interrupted our kiss.

I froze with my face in the duck sponge. I hadn't even heard her come in.

"Lana?" my mother bawled. "Lana, are you going to be out of there soon? I need to go to the toilet."

I'd blown all my birthday money on a new outfit that was special enough for Planet Hollywood. It was absolutely fabulous. The dress was silky and black, with thin straps dotted with rhinestones and a rhinestone heart on the left breast. I saw Julia Roberts wearing something very similar on a chat show. The dress was so clingy that you couldn't wear *anything* underneath except really thin tights. I got silver tights in Sock Shop that were really thin but glittery, though not *too* glittery. Glittery like Cher would wear, not glittery like Baby Spice. And I bought this black lace jacket to go over the dress.

But the most expensive things I bought were the shoes. They were incredible. They were black and silver, with chunky six-inch heels, thick soles and ankle straps. They were the kind of shoes you'd wear if you were going to the Oscars. The old cow would have a fit if she knew how much I spent on those shoes.

I had some articles I'd cut out of magazines that showed you how to make yourself up like a model. I spread them out on my dressing-table with all my new make-up. Foundation, lipgloss, eye shadow, mascara, eyeliner – I had the lot in the trendiest

autumn shades. I teetered in front of the mirror, trying to get my face just right. It's important to look natural, but more perfect than natural. One of the articles said you should dust a little talc on your lashes to hold the mascara better, but that didn't work too well. I got powder in my eyes and everything started running. I had to go back to the bathroom to wash it all off and start again.

Charley arrived straight from the garage while I was rubbing fresh Nivea into my skin. The old cow started banging on the door again.

"Lana!" she bellowed. "Lana, Charley needs a shower."

Knowing Charley, I reckoned what he really needed was dry-cleaning. I personally couldn't go out with a man who was covered in grease all the time. I was only going to date professionals.

"For God's sake!" I screamed back. "How am I supposed to get ready when you keep interrupting me?"

I threw the towel at the rack and staggered back to my room. I didn't have much experience with six-inch heels.

I was just choosing my perfume when she started screaming again.

"For the love of God, Lana! Do you think there's any chance we'll get out of the house tonight?"

"I'm coming... I'm coming..." I screamed back. "Just give me a minute, will you?"

I sprayed some Tommy Girl on my pulse points, put on my lace jacket, and studied myself in the

mirror. I was knockout. Really knockout. I looked at least twenty. A twenty-year-old model, that's what I looked like.

I gave my reflection a sexy smile.

"Kate Winslet, eat your heart out," I whispered. "Eat your heart out, and choke."

My mother and Charley were in the kitchen, having a glass of wine while they waited for me. As per usual, they didn't offer me any. Not even on my birthday. My best friend Shanee's mother let her have a drink on special occasions, but the strongest thing Hilary Spiggs would let me have was Diet Coke.

I walked slowly down the hall, trying not to sway too much.

"Here I am," I called as I reached the door. I tossed my hair and smiled shyly. Like Cher in *Moonstruck* when she's had her make-over and she sees Nicolas Cage waiting for her, wondering if he'll notice the difference. "All ready to go!"

In *Moonstruck*, Nicolas Cage is gobsmacked by the sight of Cher all dressed up with her hair in curls.

In my kitchen, my mum and Charley were pretty gobsmacked by the sight of me.

Charley was nearest the door.

"Wow," said Charley. "Look at you!" Then he started to say "Happy Birthday, Lana," but he only got as far as "Hap—"

She'd been staring at me in silence, more like a rabbit caught in the headlights than Nicolas Cage

caught by love, and then she went off like a siren.

“What the hell are you supposed to be dressed up for?” she shrieked. “You’re not going out with us, looking like *that*.”

Charley glanced over at her. “Hilary,” said Charley. “Hilary, don’t start.”

“Go right back to your room and take that junk off your face this minute!” she roared. “And put on something decent while you’re at it.”

“I am decent.” My voice was as stiff as my eyelashes.

“Only if you’re a child prostitute,” she informed me. “We’re not going anywhere with you dressed like a tart.”

Charley knocked back his wine. “You look like you might be cold,” he mumbled. “Have you got a coat?”

“Never mind the coat,” she roared. “She isn’t leaving this house like that, and that’s final.”

Charley looked at his glass in case it had been magically topped up since he emptied it.

Sometimes I didn’t know why she put up with Charley. He was unattractive, overweight, filthy ninety-five per cent of the time, and he never wanted to do anything but go to the pub with his mates or watch telly. But sometimes I didn’t know why he put up with *her*, with her nasty moods and everything. This was one of the times I felt sorry for him.

“For Christ’s sake, Hil,” said Charley. “It’s Lana’s birthday. Let her be.”

My mother turned her glare from me to him. “It’s her fifteenth birthday, not her thirtieth.” She was pronouncing her words really clearly. She went back to glaring at me. “I’m your mother,” she informed me.

Big news.

“So what?” I screamed back. “I’m not a little kid any more. You can’t keep treating me like I’m a baby.”

She gave me her Mother Face. The Mother Face wasn’t pleasant and affectionate and understanding like the face of the mother in the Oxo ad. The Mother Face made it clear that *she* knew everything, and that she could say or do anything and it was all right because she once carried me around inside her for a couple of months. Big deal.

“I’m your mother,” she said again. In case I’d forgotten in the two seconds since the last time she said it.

“Not ’cos you wanted to be!” I screamed. “You never wanted me.” I knew this because I’d heard her talking to my nan about it when we went to Hastings in the summer. I was an accident. My sisters were already grown up; she’d really been planning to go back to college.

“What are you talking about? Of course I wanted you.”

“No you didn’t. You wanted to drink gin and throw yourself down the stairs.”

She rolled her eyes and sighed.

“If you don’t get that stuff off your face and put

on something decent, I'm going to drink gin and throw *you* down the stairs," said my mother.

"I'm fifteen," I said in my coldest, most grown-up voice. "Everybody my age dresses like this."

"Everybody your age does not live with *me*."

"I don't hear anybody crying."

She slammed her glass down on the counter. "As long as you live in this house, you do what I say. Now go back to your room and put on some clothes."

"No." My lower lip trembled. "I'm not changing, and you can't make me."

The old witch cackled. "Oh can't I?"

Charley said, "Hil, let it go, all right? She'll be sitting down anyway, what's the difference?" He gave me a weak smile. "You look really pretty."

She looked like she wanted to hit him.

"Stay out of this, Charley. This is my house and my daughter!" The glasses on the draining-board started to rattle as the decibel level rose. "I don't need any advice on bringing up children from *you*."

Charley gazed at the wine bottle with real longing, but it was behind her shoulder and he knew better than to try to make a grab for it.

"Hil, for Christ's sake. You're getting all wound up about nothing. Let's just get our coats and go, all right? Have a nice me—"

"I'm not going anywhere with her looking like that!" She was talking to him, but she was looking at me. "Am I making myself clear, Little Miss

Babe Power? You can have cheese on toast for your birthday dinner for all I care.”

My teeth were clenched so tight I thought they might chip.

“That’s fine with me!” I shrieked back. “The only place I’d go with you is your funeral, you miserable old cow.”

That was when she hit me. Slap with her palm, right on the cheek.

“Don’t you talk to me like that.” She was shaking with rage. “I’m your mother.”

I put my face right into hers. “Well, I bloody well wish you weren’t. Do you hear me? I’d rather have Cruella De Vil as my mother!”

“The way you’re going, you may get your wish!” shrieked the Wicked Witch.

And I ran out of the room and out of the flat as fast as a person on six-inch heels could.