



# CHASING THE RAIN

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by

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## ONE

I'd taken to behaving strangely, which was hardly surprising after six months in Los Angeles. Surprising really that it had taken so long. But I was doing strange things, things alien to my character, like accosting British tourists in search of Polo Mints and a sense of perspective. Mostly, I came away from them ten excruciating minutes later with nothing except a sense of tedium but you can see how desperate I'd become. A desperation borne out of homesickness and a sudden attack of the jitters; an irrational fear that somehow things had gone too well for me, since in almost six months I hadn't been murdered, ram-raided or carnapped.

My homesickness was probably worse than my fear, and certainly it had more frightening implications as I would seek out the faces behind the British accents I heard to talk about: what was happening in *Coronation Street*; whether the Gold Blend couple had slept together yet; what the latest Tory sex scandal was; what new stupidity Brussels was imposing on a proud and reluctant nation; what the latest betting was on Prince Charles ever becoming King. Issues which, when I was at home I

would have had nothing but contempt for; yet which, lately, had assumed importance of epic proportion in my affections.

And you'd think I would've learned. But my craving for home kept me repeating the same old mistakes. So as soon as the tourists heard what I did, they began testing out their rudimentary Italian on me, reeling off for good measure where they'd visited in Italy.

I shouldn't've been honest. I should've said that I was a Professor of Mathematics - that would've killed the conversation. Anyhow, I didn't, so even in the week I was finally leaving Los Angeles, I met a couple from Auchtermuchty who told me that their son had appeared on *Mastermind*, Italian Politics 1970-1994 and The Music of Jimmy Shand being his specialist subjects. You know, as if I cared. Made me think, though. If I went on it I would pick something to get them talking.

"Your name, please."

"Lee Henson."

"Your occupation?"

"University Professor."

"Your specialist subject?"

"The sexual prowess of the Senior Honours male from 1978 to 1982."

"Ms. Henson, you have two minutes on the sexual prowess of the Senior Honours male from 1978 to 1982, starting from ... NOW! Who was the first male to sleep with someone in Freshers' Week?"

"Mal Thom..."

"Correct."

"...on the first night, with Jenny Joel."

"Correct. Who pinned a rose on Kay Spencer's door every night for three months until she agreed to sleep with him?"

"John Hall."

"Correct."

"And he could've had any one of us instead of her, but, oh, no, he always wanted the ones who didn't show any interest."

"Correct. What is he doing now?"

"He's a merchant banker in Singapore and on his way to being a millionaire."

"Correct. Why did you pretend not to like him?"

"Because he didn't know I existed."

"Correct. What are *you* doing now?"

"Pass."

"Looking back, where did you think then .... I've started so I'll finish ... Looking back, where did you think then that you'd be today? I'll have to hurry you Ms. Henson?"

"Well I didn't think I'd still be *Ms.* Henson, for one..."

"Yes, I'll accept that, correct."

Good old *Mastermind*. I hadn't watched it in years yet the mention of it provoked in me a nostalgia that nearly made me weep. Things were really getting bad - I never thought that I'd crave to hear Magnus Magnusson's voice. But it's funny how you can feel more homesick the nearer you are to going home. Maybe it's the anticipation that makes it so unbearable. I dunno. But with only days to go until I boarded the flight to London, everything I saw or heard seemed to accentuate what I was suddenly desperately missing.

And what I yearned for most of all - Magnus Magnusson's voice aside - was a rainy day. I'd been in Los Angeles January through June without experiencing any change of season, an unnatural state, let me tell you. So, more than anything, I was looking forward to waking up and hearing the raindrops batter against the windows

of my flat. And as for a walk in a still downpour of a British summer, I'd elevated that to heavenly status.

For I'd developed a theory during my six months in LA that constant sunshine was the main cause of affective disorders. You know, when you get up every day and the sun is shining it can be so depressing, believe me. Unreasonable expectations of life arise which inevitably lead to disappointment: whereas tragedy, failure, broken-hearts, they can all be rationalised sitting in the rain.

They say that it's the New Yorkers who have the analysts, and that may be true; but it's the Californians who need them. They're neurotic, paranoid, and it's because of the weather.

When I'd first learned that I was going to the States, I thought, of course, that it must be a joke. You know, the suggestion that I - or anyone - go there to encourage linguistic excellence seemed kind of alien. At their most enthusiastic, I'd found American students to be disinterested in foreign languages. Even the ones who spent their year in Britain hopping over to Europe weekends usually lost the initial enthusiasm for learning another language as soon as they realised that every

waiter and restaurateur from Paris to Athens spoke the only English that mattered - dollars and cents.

And when I heard that not only was I going to the States but to LA, I thought that it must be a very bad joke indeed. Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, I could've tholed; but LA? Even worse, as part of my contract I had to get back to basics: you know the sort of thing; teaching, seeing students. It was gonna be hell.

For in the previous few years, I'd gradually steered my career away from the classroom and into what had started as research and resulted in my becoming a popular expert. Which meant that all I had to do was make a few pronouncements every so often when someone died or there was some political, social or cultural event. Being a popular expert in things Italian, though, I was kept pretty busy.

My most recent foray was into the world of publishing. I'd done a few articles on Italian current affairs and a few book reviews, then, somehow, I'd been asked to translate a volume of short stories by Italian whizz-kid, Lucia Rassello. I'd intended while in LA to get it completed - started even - but after six months I still hadn't begun.

One impediment was that I enjoyed reading the stories so much that I couldn't bear to tarnish them by translating. But by far my biggest problem was idleness. Los Angeles was not a city conducive to academic pursuit. There were too many distractions, too many new people to meet, too many parties to attend. And my position as something unique in the city - a linguist - meant that I was always in demand, for my novelty value if for nothing else. How these excuses were going to go down with Roderick in the face of a missed deadline, I dreaded to think. You know, even making allowances for the fact that he was an editor, the guy was such a wuss.

I soon discovered that my perception of the Yanks as linguistic philistines was pretty accurate but came to understand that they were probably wise to recognise their shortcomings since they seemed to a man unable to pronounce the simplest words of another language without first undergoing intensive coaching and, sometimes, therapy. Certainly, I'd considered therapy myself after realising the hopelessness of the situation. But, in truth, I liked the Yanks as they were. There was something about their attitudes that I liked, something appealing about their ability to express things that no

self-respecting Brit would ever admit to. While we wore our stoicism with dour dignity, they wore their angst with joyful panache.

There were even gonna be things that I would miss about LA. Good old, crazy LA. Sure, it was a city of extremes, where they had root beer that tasted like germoline and shampoo that smelt like marzipan, but they also had great frozen yoghurt, dreams, good lookin' guys, and gob stoppers that would give the trading standards guys back home heart attacks. It was just a shame that such pleasures were diminished by the thought that the next cadaver key ring sold on Hollywood Boulevard could have my toe tag on it.

And although I'd soon be far away from LA and its smoggy paranoia, I'd begun to get paranoid myself, to the extent that I'd even thought about buying a handgun to make sure I survived the final days. There had been two armed robberies at neighbourhood stores the previous weekend and I figured that I'd rather not be remembered as the poor woman who was murdered a day before she was due to leave after six uneventful months. Silly really. I'd been a woman alone for a year in Rome; I'd travelled amidst the frotteurs on the buses, so I was no

stranger to danger. But I knew things were getting pretty serious in these last few days. As Courtenay pointed out, my habit of muttering, 'Dear God, let me out of this city alive,' to myself was not the sign of a well woman.

It was Courtenay who talked me out of the gun idea, as she'd talked me out of so many other stupid ideas. Which was kind of strange since she was a member of a women-only gun club and would come back from classes talking all about female bonding and how she would blow the brains out of any intruder in her house. But then she is the down-to-earth type.

When we were down at Venice pretending we were glad we weren't young anymore, she said that age was relative and that to some people even we were young. And on the day I spotted my first grey hair, she didn't give me the stuff about it being distinguished, all she said was, 'Lee, honey, it comes to us all.' And I guess she was right. I'd known her for six months and in that time she'd always been right. So she was probably right about the gun idea too, although I did rebel for a few moments to retain a fragment of dignity.

"Listen, I know the figures," I told her. Yeah, I'd seen the billboards. "24,000 Americans killed with handguns

every year, 1 in 25 high school students carrying a gun to school." It was enough to make you give everyone straight 'A's. "Didn't you hear about that guy who shot the four guys at the fitness centre 'cos his girlfriend said they had better bodies than his? And did you know that...."

"That's hardly likely to happen to you is it?"

"... every six hours a child commits suicide with a gun."

"So? You wanna commit suicide?"

"Well, you know, if it keeps me from being murdered."

Instead of buying a gun, Courtenay suggested we take a trip to Las Vegas for our last weekend together. Except for Vegas being the aesthetic equivalent of murder, I couldn't see the connection, nor was I very keen. But when she told me that the alternative was a series of functions at the university, I saw reason. And anyway, I'd never been to Las Vegas and I figured I should at least see Mammon's shrine before I left the country.

My last working day in LA was nervy. I was impatient as I said my good-byes to Professors Fattorini and Jacobs. I promised to send them both signed copies

of the Rassello edition, the publication of which I had allowed them to believe was imminent, and they offered me a venue for my tour when future volumes of literary criticism came out and tried to persuade me once again to take up a position with them. Bret, my favourite - if linguistically challenged - student, kissed my hand as he'd done every day for nearly six months, and made me vow to go out with him when he came to London. I agreed without hesitating, safe in the knowledge that if he ever made it to London, he would be far too busy chasing students to bother about someone thirteen years his senior and with none of the *bella figura* of his contemporaries. Hell, someone who wouldn't wear Gucci glasses and shoes even though she could afford them.

Actually, though, while in LA I'd started wearing contacts and after twenty years of glasses I had encountered a freedom I thought had been lost with the passing diopters. I decided to get them not long after attending a cocktail party where a doctor had tried to convince me to have laser surgery to correct my myopia. He said I had just the type of problem for which the treatment had its highest success rates; I told him that I'd

seen the consequences of breast implants and plastic surgery and that I didn't want to end up blind in ten years time. When he threw me the line about the probabilities of failure being less than the risk of getting killed crossing the road, I knew that he was floundering. I'd seen the traffic on the freeways around LA - he'd probably never been out of Beverly Hills except to get to LAX during the riots.

When I told Courtenay about what he'd said, she suggested I try contacts. When I asked her why she'd never thought about getting them, too, she said that she didn't need actually need glasses, that the pair she wore were only an accessory.

We left LA headed for Las Vegas on a Saturday morning. My excitement and anticipation about starting the journey home, though, were dampened somewhat by the presence of Merrill, best friend of Courtenay's partner, Alec.

When we'd first discussed it, Courtenay had planned our trip as a girlies' weekend. Then Alec had heard about it and thought it would be a good idea if he came along too. So far, so good; for if Alec hadn't been devoted to Courtenay I would have been attempting to lure him back

to London with me at every available moment. And, hey, you never knew when these crazy Yanks would go all mature and platonic on each other. However, dear Alec, in his sweet way, thought it'd be nice if we made it a foursome.

Enter Merrill. Merrill Zzyzx, to be precise; thus named so that he'd be the last entry in the phone book. But, hell, even he didn't know how to pronounce it. Served him right when ZZ-Zip Laundry confined him to the anonymity of the penultimate name. After all, who was it who said that no one remembers who the second man on the moon was? Merrill would probably have been able to tell me the answer to both questions, though, because that was the kind of guy he was. An asshole.

Downtown was its usual distant grey as we headed away from the city which had been my home for almost six months. I can't say that as we drove out onto US15 I looked back with fondness, or even with regret. I'd probably never return to LA, but at least, as my mother would say, I'd seen it and I'd tried it.



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