

## A Face in the Crowd

She had no umbrella, so the Queen caught up her collar, glad to hide her face from the rain and from the few stragglers lingering in the thin drizzle. It had been a beast of a day and it wasn't over yet.

The Queen lengthened her stride as she headed up The Mall. No one gave her a second glance. Why should they? An elderly woman walking by herself in London wasn't exactly a novelty, and the wig helped. When she'd first decided to head out of the Palace, the Queen had automatically reached for one of her trusty Hermes scarves, before pausing. Hardly anyone wore headscarves these days - she'd be recognised in an instant.

Then she'd remembered the dark wig Andrew had jollied her to into wearing for private fancy dress do one Christmas, years ago. Along with an old wax jacket, a pair of beige trousers and some comfy shoes, it was the perfect disguise.

Still, she worried. It only took one person to recognise her then all hell would break loose. After all, it was her big day and the world's cameras had been greedily focused on her for hours.

However, the further she walked the more the Queen noticed that people were wrapped up in themselves, barely seeing anyone around them. Everyone seemed content – 'the firm', as Philip tiresomely labelled the family, had put on a superb show as usual – but they were weary now and home was calling.

The Queen fingered the illicit £10 note in her jacket pocket. It wasn't exactly stolen, borrowed more like. Tessa was her most loyal maid, and hadn't blinked when the Queen asked for "a bit of cash".

Tessa had even helped plan her exit route. Diamond Jubilee or not, the royal routine didn't vary too much and tonight was no exception. The palace staff knew the Queen was not to be disturbed after 8.30pm. With Tessa as lookout, slipping out through a little-used entrance had been a breeze.

The ease with which she had escaped made the Queen feel a little light-headed and she sat down quickly on a bench near Clarence House. 'Mustn't think about what I'm doing, just do it,' she muttered. That's what the boys - especially Harry - used to say when they were younger - 'just do it, Granny'. Though what they'd think if they knew what she was up to now...

"Are you all right, love?" The Queen jumped. Crouching beside her was a young, fresh-faced police officer. She felt a stir of irritation. Now wasn't the time to get rumbled.

Rising swiftly, she replied in a soft West Country accent, "fine thanks, my love," and, offering a silent prayer of thanks for her gift of mimicry, set off again towards her destination.

Under Admiralty Arch and into Trafalgar Square, the Queen pursed her lips as she ploughed through more litter than she had ever seen before. Crumpled sandwich boxes, squashed tin cans and dozens of limp paper union jacks, all flung aside at the end of the celebrations.

Laughter and music erupted from a restaurant, along with the tempting aroma of garlic and herbs. The Queen paused, hands in her coat pockets, drinking in the unfamiliar sights and sounds. When had she ever experienced her capital city like this? She had been all round the world and seen the magnificent wonders it had to offer, but this was probably the biggest adventure she would ever have.

Walking briskly past St Martin-in-the-Fields, she could see Charing Cross Station ahead. Crossing the road, she turned left and, heart thumping in anticipation, walked towards her brightly-lit destination.

The Queen took a deep breath and pushed open the door, blinking hard as a hurricane of noise, light and unfamiliar odours rushed to greet her.

She joined the queue and found herself facing a scruffy leather jacket, with God Save The Queen spelt out in metal studs. With a wry smile she realised that for maybe the first time in her life, one of her loyal subjects deliberately had his back to her.

Moments later she was face-to-face with a bored-looking young girl. One of the benefits of learning to use a computer was that the Queen had managed to look up in advance what she wanted.

"A Big Mac, please," she said, in her best Home Counties accent.

"Here or takeaway?"

"Here, thank you." The Queen handed over her £10 and received her carton and change. It was all surprisingly easy.

Keeping her head down, she made her way to an empty table and sat down. Placing the flimsy napkin on her lap, she opened the carton and looked down at what represented the crown jewels of cuisine to some of her people.

The burger didn't look quite the same as on the computer screen, but the Queen picked it up and bit into it anyway. She was surprised at how hungry she was and it didn't take long for her to polish it off.

Remembering the rules, she placed the carton and napkin in the bin before leaving. Standing outside, she took almost laughed at the audacity of it all. She had done it! Now she just needed to get home...

"Evening, Your Majesty."

The Queen froze. It was the youth in the studded leather jacket.

She smiled weakly as he winked at her.

"Good evening." No need for a different accent now.

"You best be getting home," the youth said. "How about a lift?" He nodded towards a large, red and white motorbike by the kerb.

The taxi rank was only 100 yards away and she had enough money left to get back to the Palace, but she'd been in a taxi before – and it was still drizzling.

She looked at the youth, now holding out a shiny black helmet.

"Why not?" the Queen replied. After all, it was her special day.

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