Chapter 1

Seven Octaves of Mirror Sin

In the eyes of the Wellbridges I was more of a drop than a catch. I was beneath their daughter and they were up in arms at the thought that she spent any time at all beneath me, God forbid face down. In her last letter Clara said they always called me "The Dizzy Blond". Bastards.

Funny peculiar to think I'm older now than they were then. Who or what does a twenty year old see when they look at me now?

The first visit I paid to Clara's stepmother and father was not a success. I tried not to be myself, I really did, but in the end I just couldn't pull it off.

So, off the bus and up the hill we go, me and my big tin of Quality Street, up to Five Hermitage Drive. Posh clean cars and elegant trees, elegant lampposts and scruffy wee me marching along hitting the tin with my rolled up newspaper, singing "We're Off to See the Wizard" to myself. On left and right, big houses with big windows you can't see into. Then the words "Family Size" scream out at me from the lid, all magnified. Oh, duck-a-doodle-cock, that's way too forward! Now I'm hearing "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge. So I hide the tin of chocolates in the hedge at Number Seven and arrive bearing no gifts at all. Arthur Harper you carnival gonk.

Five Hermitage Drive. The house is HUGE, and I’m a speck of dust on my father’s shirtsleeve. I look up and I'm clubbed over the head with its owner's success. I don't trust that monkey puzzle tree either. The brass plate announces "Mr and Mrs Maxwell Wellbridge" in a butler's voice and I smooth down my hair, tuck in my shirt, polish my right shoe on the back of my left trouser leg, and step forward.

The door bell's as loud as a school bell, just by pressing it I feel like I've done something wrong. It's still echoing as the click click click of high heels approaches and I'm half way to hypnotised by the slow swing of hips behind frosted glass. Fingers crossed that's not Mr Wellbridge.

"Mrs Wellbridge?"

"Please Stephanie."

It's a seductive instruction not a putting at ease. The seduction's all in the missing comma, curled up and purring. Is she really making eyes at me behind her UV Jackie O's? It's hard to tell: her face is frozen, like a daiquiri. Here lies Lank Hair RIP. Cause of Death: Peroxicide.

My manners boil over and I take her yellow hand and kiss it, I can't believe I did that. Zooming out from zircon to giving her the once-over on the sly I see that Painted Whore of Babylon is in this Season. The smell of cigarettes and perfume coming off her cheapens my lust, and that's saying something. She licks the lipstick off her teeth and gives me a how-dare-you-look-at-me-how-dare-you-not-look-at-me smile I'd have paid good money for.

"Come through."

Starry-starry-eyed, I follow her across grey slate, deep plum shag pile carpet and an Azerbaijani rug.

We enter the hall. Sweeping up from a chaise improbably longue is a grander than grand double staircase, I imagine Rhett Butler striding down one side and a giant 24 carat gold Slinky coming down the other. She points at the tiles - "The distressed limestone is Baycliff Lord." - and I get the strong feeling she has memorised that sentence and, like me, does not know what it means.

Through three more rooms we walk in silence, except for the creaking of her Donna Karan white leather trousers and the squeaking of my C&A shoes. Behind my eyes choice pocketable items flash and gleam as I flog them in the back room down my local: figurine of Napoleon (bronze), sentimental rabbit (silver), miniature carriage clock (gold). My furtive sale continues until the better part of me flushes my stinky wee thoughts away and I wipe my hands on my cords.

This house is big enough to lose a lion in, maybe it's playing hide and seek with their pet baby rhino.

"This is the ballroom. Max leans to softwood. I prefer a hardwood flooring."

She nods at a lampshade on a white grand piano.

"Vintage abalone. French."

"Do you play?" I ask.

In answer she holds out her salon talons.

"Max wanted Queen Anne legs but I insisted on claw and ball."

"Clara and I sometimes play piano together, she plays the white notes, I play the black notes."

She whips off her shades and looks me dead in the eyes. I'm fighting a very real attraction to her bottle-bronzed boobs.

"You should try playing the white notes," she says, her fingertips playing across the buttons of her white blouse, "They've got more music in them."

Stephanie and me and the frozen faced grandfather clock stand in silence together while my head explodes with a simian strut and seven octaves of sin. The imaginary tick tock tick tocks get louder and louder until Simon and Garfunkel are harmonising in my head. She breaks The Sound of Silence with a creaking turn of her Donna Karans and slinks into the kitchen towards the smell of smoked haddock and boiled eggs.

Oh me of little faith! - the champagne flutes on the breakfast bar are music to my eyes, I drink in a mouth-watering sight: a big iron skillet of simmering kedgeree, French sticks and melon balls and Parma ham and tiramisu and a tower of profiteroles and a Black Forrest gateau in a CAKE BOX!

Oh. My. God. AND a cheese'n'ham'n'pickled onion pineapple hedgehog. Ya dancer! Luxury or what?!

Tip tap tippety-tap, Tip tap tippety-tap: Stephanie's pressed herself up against the glass sliding doors like a huge albino house gecko and her nail extensions are tapping out a message: "You really should be, lookin' at me. You really should be, lookin' at me." Gecko Girl or not, she plainly fancies herself as a naked silhouette in the opening titles of a James Bond film. Unchained malady in my head.

"Stephanie, what a magnificent spread."

She looks at me over her shoulder, and now she's a retro faux doe-eyed old dear.

"Really, Stephanie, you didn't need to go to all that trouble."

With a hip roll she pirouettes out of her showgirl pose and flicks her hair.

"I did actually, we're having friends over later."

"Oh I see Mrs Wellbridge."

She slides open the patio doors and whips me out of the kitchen with a flash of her long dark lashes.

"C'mon, out you go."

Outside in the garden on the flagstone arms akimbo, she nods at a wicker table and I sit myself down on a white cane chair in the shade of a cantilever parasol.

Hmm. Oddly like Holland.

"Arthur, I'm just going to give the club a call and see where Max has got to. Make yourself at home."

I've never made myself at home on garden furniture before, it's certainly a very spacious reception room, nice high ceiling. Still, their outdoor furniture is better than my indoor furniture.

The house looms up. To push it back I'm head to toe in black on an easy midnight clamber up those drainpipes to that skylight. I'd love a proper ferret about. It doesn't cost anything to dream.

I wish Clara was here, we'd soon shine a light into all these dark corners.

Nothing to eat, nothing to drink. I turn the thick bottomed tumbler in my hand and swirl the emptiness. What a total bummer, so much for my welcome feast. Hmm, if you don't got the pedigree you don't get no kedgeree.

I have a go at giving myself a smouldering look in the smoked glass French windows but a baleful donkey-face looks back, so I sigh a pathetic little ee-aw, unroll my newspaper and turn to Page 3: it's about time for another long, disapproving look at Mandy, 19, from Manchester.

Mandy is a natural blonde and firmly of the opinion that the Bank of England base rate should remain unchanged and we should all support Our Brave Boys over in the Falklands. That's enough to make her uber-pert very silly cones pixelate into sexless abstraction, so I roll her up and toss her everlasting sunshine smile into my jerkin pocket.

Sitting in the garden looking at the sky, even the high sun looks like it belongs to the Wellbridges. I look back at the house with no books - I KNEW something felt strange walking through it - what's going on behind those inky windows? With a big cartoon gesture I look at the watch I'm not wearing...C'mon Clara, get your rollerskates on Zoop Zoop: you're late you're late for a very awkward date. The thought of her smile puts a jetpack on my back and I'm up with the butterflies and bees moonwalking forwards in time to the putt putt putter of the water pump until I reach the gurgling pond swallowing up the waterfall. Clara, remember you told me one morning that butterflies taste with their feet? Let's walk barefoot together one day across this sweet watered lawn. Remember our song? “I wonder why, I wonder why, a beautiful butterfly licks its eye?” Where ARE you Zoopa?

Down from the weather-stained windows of the kitch wee concrete church tumbles a burn, the glistening rocks are real but they look like rocks on strange planets in Star Trek. I catch my face in the water and through it swims a blotchy koi. I flip an imaginary shiny two pence piece into my reflection and watch it spin and turn away, turning deep into me. But I don't have any change on me and I don't feel like making a wish, so I pick up a stone and plop it into the water and watch my face disperse: sometimes an ugly duckling grows up to be an ugly duck.

I look up to see a chubby-cheeked cherub and he looks up at heaven from his plinth, he's full of himself and the bliss of perpetual piss. My hand snaps off the smug wee bastard's concrete willy, it's more like watching a weirdo being weird than something I do myself. I pop the little prick in my pocket and scurry back to the table like a cat that's just done its business in the rose bed. The cherub's unbroken arc to the pond has me banging my head again and again against a concrete rainbow. I look up at those watching inky windows and down at my hands: "Bad hands!" I say to my hands.

There was no-one watching except you, was there Harpo?